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Stakhanovism and the British workers

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Marie Louise Berneri's article on Stakhanovism and other
methods imposed on workers in order to squeeze more
productivity and profit out of them for the Soviet and British
war economies. Written in 1942 and reprinted in *The Left and
World War 2: Selections from the Anarchist Journal 'War
Commentary' 1939-1943.*

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War brings the need for increased production and maximum effort on the part of the workers. This is what all the propaganda nowadays tries to impress on the workers. Since Russia has come into the war it is not surprising therefore that the Russian worker should be given as an example to the British workers in order to induce them to produce more. The Russian Trade Union delegation in all its speeches stressed the fact that production could be increased and that workers in Russia produce far more than they do here. The influence of Russian methods is already felt. The *Manchester Guardian* of 8th March 1942, under the heading 'Stakhanovites in Lancashire', printed the following report:

The Cotton Board's 'Trade Letter' reports the interesting methods adopted by one firm of cotton spinners and manufacturers to increase output. Production boards, especially floodlit, have been set up in all rooms to show daily production and production aimed at. Special badges are being

made for wear and by operatives with good or increased output records. These badges have a design of the firm's crest with the words 'War Production Worker'.

Weekly five-minute 'pep talks' are being given over loudspeakers while the workers have meals in the canteen. A weekly or fortnightly letter to the operatives is being compiled to keep them in touch with all the latest developments.

Production boards and badges – these are familiar methods of stimulating the Russian workers, but since the introduction of Udarnism and Stakhanovism the Russian Government has gone much further in its technique of increasing production. If Russian methods are going to be introduced in this country it may be of interest to the British workers to know what these methods really consist of.

According to Stalin, socialism can and will defeat the capitalist system "because it can furnish higher models of labour, a higher productivity of labour than the capitalist system of economy. Because it can give society more products and can make society richer than the capitalist system of economy can." The aim of the Russian Revolution has not been as one would have expected to reduce the working hours of the workers and to improve his standard of life but to make him produce more and more. Stakhanovism was not the first method used by the ruling classes of the Soviet Union to extract more work from the people. Already in 1928 brigades of udarniks were formed. The udarniks being workers who voluntarily undertook to work more and better, "to set themselves to set the themselves to raise the standard of output, to diminish scrap or breakages, to put an end to time wasting or unnecessary absenteeism, and to make the utmost use of the instrument of socialist emulation." (*Soviet Communism*, S. And B. Webb). Udarniks received all kinds of privileges in food, clothes and holidays which put

them in a superior position to that of the rest of the workers. Piece work being general in Russia, they also of course received better wages.

Udarniks received, like Stakhanovists later, the greatest publicity and encouragement from the government; but such publicity cannot have an everlasting effect and in 1935 a new publicity campaign was launched with the introduction of stakhanovism. In May 1935 Stalin made a speech telling the younger workers of the USSR that they had a “master technique”. This was the signal for a campaign for increased production and, in August of the same year, the miner Stakhanov with the help of the Communist directors of the mine established the first record by cutting 100 tonnes of coal in one day (the average coal cut in the Ruhr is 10 tonnes and the maximum 16 or 17 tonnes a day). All over Russia and in every kind of industry, from cotton weavers to shop assistants and trade union officials, stakhanovists sprang up. The Government insisted on the spontaneity of the movement and explained by the improvement in the conditions of the workers, but it was obvious that it was inspired and supported by the Government machine. Stakhanov’s declaration praising Stalin as the originator of the movement can be taken literally more than as a compliment to the leader:

I really don’t not know why this movement is called the Stakhanovtchina, it should be rather the Stalintchina [Stalin’s movement]! The beloved leader of the Communist Party and of the peoples of the USSR, comrade Stalin and the Bolshevik Party which he leads, have inspired our victories.

The purpose of the stakhanovist campaign soon became obvious. The Central Committee declared the enthusiasm shown by the workers was due to the betterment of their conditions of life and instead of rejoicing at this improvement immediately proceeded to decree the revision of all norms of work.

A revision of collective labour contracts was carried out which resulted in the increasing of the norms of work without a corresponding increase of work and in the creation of a labour caste receiving higher wages and privileges. A stakhanovist miner received 580 roubles in 11 days instead of a month. A stakhanovist engine driver received 900 roubles a month instead of 400, etc. This created hostility and division among the workers.

The stakhanovists method is not something new. Ford and Taylor had long before defined means by which the workers would produce the maximum work in the minimum time. Their methods were of course despised and hated by the working people all over the world. When a few years ago the Duke of Windsor wanted to visit an American factory in company with Bedaux, the workers threatened to go on strike if he came with a man who had refined the method of exploitation of the workers. The originality of the Russian method was to give a character of spontaneity to the movement, of covering the dirty exploitation of the majority of workers under a heap of socialist slogans. Stakhanovist workers did not find new methods of work, they rationalised production by introducing more division of labour. Stakhanov, for example, was helped by a team which prepared the place and removed the coal while he concentrated on cutting coal. Stakhanovist salesmen quickened their service “by having already packed quantities usually demanded of the commodities in greatest request.” (*Soviet Communism*, S. And B. Webb). The records achieved by stakhanovist workers were obviously tricked (gangs worked at night in order to prepare the work, a gang of workers assisted the stakhanovist, etc.) This explains how certain stakhanovist workers have achieved records which have aroused the incredulity of most western workers. Two months after Stakhanov cut 102 tonnes of coal in one day, for example, the miner Matchekin cut in the same time 1,466 tonnes of coal! The Government did not take the trouble to explain these figures – it merely wanted to impress

theirs. Socialism is achieved in the factories and in the fields by the workers taking over production and distributing the products according to peoples' needs. It is not achieved by dividing the working class in categories of wage earners, by applying degrading methods of production: piece work and a system of sweated labour.

When, with the pretext of fighting fascism, British workers are asked to collaborate with the capitalists and the government to carry out their own exploitation by such means as setting up production committees or by introducing stakhanovist methods, they should remember that fascism is fought more efficiently in the factories than on the battlefields. Every defeat of the capitalist class is a defeat for fascism. Every time the workers obtain a reduction in their hours of work and a rise in salaries, every time they affirm workers' solidarity by defending a victimised fellow worker, every time they abolish degrading methods of production, every time they achieve a victory over their boss, they win a victory against fascism and pave the way to socialism.

When the revolution has been achieved there will be no need for stakhanovist methods. All workers will give society labour according to their strength and ability, not in exchange for wages but for food, clothes, pleasures, to satisfy their needs.

the imagination of the average worker, make him feel ashamed of the little work he did. One should mention here that after having achieved these records, most stakhanovists were taken into rest in houses or were sent to lecture in universities and factories. They did not go back to work, their job was done; they had *proved* that workers should produce more. In April 1936 an Institute of Work which prepared norms compatible with maintaining good health among the workers was closed as harmful, its scientific norms having been brilliantly demolished by stakhanovist practice!

As might be expected, the already overworked and underfed Russian workers did not accept with enthusiasm an increase in the norms of production which for many meant a reduction in salary. The Soviet press reported many cases where stakhanovists met with the hostility of their fellow workers.

In the factory Krasny Shtampivchik, a stakhanovist worker found on her loom a dirty broom with the following note: 'To the comrade Belog, this bouquet is offered in order to thank her for having increased by three times our norms'.

(*Troud*, 1st November 1935)

'Horses are not men; they cannot follow socialist emulation.' This is what Maximovitch had the audacity to say to Orloff, an official of the Communist Youth, who proposed that he increases the work of horse conductors at the bottom of the mine. When out in Loutch we learned from a local paper that when we asked how the [stakhanovist] method carried, of 38 pits 35 were opposed to the new method with a more or less open sabotage.

(*Izvestia*, 2nd October 1935)

In a factory where wagons were repaired two workers were condemned to five and three years imprisonment for having stolen the instruments of a stakhanovist worker.

(*Pravda*, 2nd November 1935)

The locksmith Konovalov killed the super-udarnik Rachtepa.

(*Izvestia*, 23rd August 1935)

The military tribunal has condemned the murderers of the stakhanovist Schmirev, the brothers Kriachov, to the highest punishment for social offence, to be shot.

(*Pravda*, 21st-2nd November 1935)

Outside Russia the stakhanovist movement was praised only by the communist and russophile press. Workers looked with mixed feelings of amusement and indignation to the 'records' of stakhanovist workers in Russia. A French miner Kleber Legay denounced the dangerous conditions in which Russian miners accomplished their exploits. In France, communist leaders had to write to their communist newspapers to stop the publication of records achieved by stakhanovist workers as they were received with laughter by the miners. The word 'stakhanovist' was used by many as an insult!

The stakhanovist movement is, according to Webbs,

A revolution in the wage-earners mentality towards measures and devices in increasing the productivity of labour... [because]... in Soviet industry, there is no 'enemy party'... the manual worker in the factory... realises that the whole of the aggregate net product... is genuinely at the

disposal of the aggregate workers... in such ways as they, by their own trade organisation, choose to determine.

The stakhanovist movement is nothing of the sort. It is a method whereby a minority of workers stronger and more skilled than others receive a higher salary and privileges at the expense of other workers. The factory management could afford to pay stakhanovist workers more than others because they helped to raise the norms of production and therefore lowered the wages of the other workers. As Taylor had already pointed out: "one must pay high salaries in order to have cheap labour."

If the workers in the Soviet Union really believed that by working harder they would increase "the whole of the aggregate product at the disposal of the aggregate workers" there would have been no need to produce more by according special privileges to them. Furthermore, by paying stakhanovist workers more, the Government made it plain that the aggregate product was not going to benefit equally each worker, but only a minority.

The only difference between stakhanovism and the old methods of capitalist exploitation consists in the fact that the workers are made to believe that they are not exploited at all but are, in reality, working for the building up of a socialist state. Workers are asked to stop defending their wages and trying to decrease their hours of work and to put the interest of the state before their own.

In Russia the workers are asked to do this under the pretext of building up a socialist country, while in reality it is not socialism which is built on workers' sweat but a class of bureaucrats and politicians. In this country workers are asked to help the Government to produce more, in spite of the capitalist economic system, so that the war can be won quicker. In both cases the workers are asked to defend interests which are not