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# Perestroika and Women Workers

BY DAVID MANDEL

**N**early half the workers in Soviet industry, and a quarter of those in construction and transport, are women. Although many of the basic problems facing Soviet women workers are common to all Soviet women, this article will limit itself to a brief discussion of some aspects of the situation of women as workers and to the impact that *perestroika* has had, and is likely to have, on it.

As in Soviet society generally, so too in the situation of women workers, *perestroika* has so far brought few positive material changes; changes that can be felt on the level of social practice. Indeed, to judge by letters to the press and opinion polls, a very large part of women workers feels things have grown worse. While this perception has a basis in reality, it is also fostered by *glasnost*, the policy of political liberalization that has allowed a much freer (but not totally uncontrolled) flow of information about society. This in turn has created a heightened awareness of social problems. This liberalization (not to be confused with democracy, in which the people collectively decide the major social questions that affect their lives) represents major progress because of its potential impact on popular consciousness. In particular, it has allowed public discussion — often very passionate — in the mass media of issues relating to women workers that were previously discussed, if at all, only in limited-circulation scholarly publications. Whatever “women’s problem” was previously admitted publicly was portrayed as a demographic one, a view still widely held, unfortunately, even in progressive “informal” circles.

One of these issues is dangerous, unhealthy and onerous work conditions. Although male workers also suffer from these, there is some basis to argue that they are relatively more women’s lot — despite the existence of legislation specifically protecting women. Official statistics put at 4.8 million the number of women in working conditions that violate norms of labour protection.<sup>1</sup> Depending upon the basis of calculation, this could be as many as one-third of the female industrial work force. Moreover, men are more routinely compensated materially for bad work conditions. For example, the wages of underground miners, a profession from which women are excluded by law, are among the highest in the Soviet Union, while those of workers in “light” industry, with its overwhelmingly female labour force, are among the lowest. Yet in 1988, conditions in 1800 enterprises of the latter sector were officially recognized as unsatisfactory.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past two years, a series of exposés have frequently shown conditions in the textile industry to be horrendous. This is the largest sector of female industrial employment. The equipment and structures of these mills tend to be ancient, the noise,

heat and dust levels extremely high, the level of mechanization of lifting operations primitive. This is one journalist’s description of Moscow’s Frunze mill:

*A white haze hovered above the shop. Dust swirled in the air and settled on my hair, crept into my eyes and mouth. My ears ached from the incredible din, the monotonous knocking — you cannot hear even the sound of your own voice — of dozens of huge looms pulling thread. One of them suddenly began to rumble: a thread coming out of its bowels broke. Immediately a girl in a worn smock ran out from somewhere. Harmonious, almost mechanical movements — and the thread once again grew taut, giving food to the insatiable loom... “Rugacheva Nadya,” she introduced herself in the corridor... “Yes, it’s hard. My hands go numb and get all black — it’s unbleached thread. Eight hours of running. When you come back to the dormitory, your feet are aching. All you want to do is collapse on the bed. Every day the same thing. And the noise — outside after work you keep on shouting from habit. We’ll be deaf when we get old.”<sup>3</sup>*

Morbidity among textile workers is high compared to women in white collar jobs of the same age.<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising that turnover and recruitment of young workers are serious problems in this industry.

Of course, it is not only in the textile industry that women work in such conditions. For example, in some enterprises of the tractor and agricultural machinery industry, which has a large female work force, the concentration of manganese dioxide is 25 times the allowed norm, and the noise and vibration levels extremely high. The rate of occupational illness here is four times the national average.<sup>5</sup> Workers in jobs officially designated as harmful do receive special benefits: wage supplements “for harmfulness,” longer holidays and early pensions. But these practices are also the object of criticism, since they are based upon the state and management’s consideration that it is cheaper and simpler to pay wage supplements than to protect the workers’ health by improving conditions. Trade-union spokespeople admit that relatively little is spent on health and safety. At the same time, the policy of “harmfulness benefits” creates among workers a material interest in staying in such conditions and not pressing collectively to eliminate them.

Labour legislation strictly limits the weight women workers can lift. Yet women are frequently employed at unmechanized jobs that require heavy lifting that violates legal norms. Thus, in the Tadzhik Republic, 42% of women workers are employed in unmechanized manual jobs. Nationally, women in woodwork-

ing, paper, glass, food and light industry made up 30-50% of the work force doing heavy physical labour.<sup>6</sup> In brick factories, women workers regularly move over 30 tonnes of silicate mass in a single shift, while the legal norm is seven. In construction, the most common job for women is painter, requiring women to carry 30 kilogram pails from floor to floor. As for "light" industry, women commonly complain that this is a misnomer.<sup>7</sup>

An important contributing factor to industrial accidents among women is the failure of machine designers to take into account woman's physiology: levers that cannot be reached, that are too hard to pull. This is especially true in the textile industry. It was found that about one-half of industrial accidents occurring in light industry result from faultily designed machines, and that 80% of the accidents occur on automatic machines designed specifically for "women's branches."<sup>8</sup> In the tractor and agricultural machinery industry, accidents resulting in death are double the national average.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most serious sources of dissatisfaction among women workers is night work, a practice that has come in for harsh criticism. Although forbidden by law, except as a temporary measure dictated by special needs of the industry, almost all textile mills have been on at least three shifts since the war. But even in industries where night work is necessary, such as petrochemicals and baking, more women work at night than men; 3.8 million more women than men are engaged on any given date in night work. Although special benefits are paid — wage supplements and early pensions — Soviet studies show the body cannot get used to night work, which is generally unproductive and results in high morbidity rates and turnover among workers.<sup>10</sup> A related issue is the large amount of overtime and worked holidays made necessary by the arhythmic nature of production. Although this problem is general, it is felt more acutely by women who bear the bulk of family responsibilities.

Women's double shift has been a public issue since the 1960s, though it still continues to be discussed largely as a demographic issue: the rate of women's participation in the labour force is felt to

be a major cause of the low birth rate. Among the principle solutions discussed are extended paid leave for women with children under three years, flexible work schedules, part-time work, home work. Limited space precludes any discussion of these proposals here. Suffice it to say that they all take for granted that the family and home are mainly a woman's responsibility.

There are, however, some dissident voices that condemn Soviet culture's "consumerist attitude" towards women, and the fact that women are most frequently portrayed with a child.<sup>11</sup>

*Rabotnitsa* last year published an article on paternal leave in Bulgaria that argued that "we need to shift the emphasis and speak less of motherhood and more of parenthood."<sup>12</sup> But these views are still rarely found in the mass press. It is not surprising, therefore, that job segregation, one of whose main sources is the double shift, has not become a major topic in the media.

While the problems of women workers are discussed more openly, practice itself has changed little. The new Law on the State Enterprise gives elected worker-collective councils broad powers to deal



on their own with social issues, but so far ministries continue to control most of the funds that could be used for these purposes. Yet if enterprise autonomy and competition do not become realities, as the reform prescribes, the result will be increased socio-economic differentiation. And it is by no means clear that most women workers, who are principally in low-skilled jobs, stand to benefit. Certainly one could conclude from the experience of Western market systems, that sexual equality is impossible in a society whose very essence is socio-economic inequality. And any improvements in industrial health and safety conditions that have been achieved in these systems has not been the result of market forces but of collective pressures on the part of workers. Indeed, when asked how the reform will help women, most Soviet radical marketeers point to increased consumption as the main benefit and do not mention work. This was the response of the noted woman sociologist, T. Zaslavskaya, in an interview on International Woman's Day last year. And her example of the consumption benefits to women was the wider variety of colours of hair dye that would become available. After all, not all women want to be blonds.<sup>13</sup> But a woman from Kemerovo wrote: "They have finally begun to speak about us women in full voice. And the papers are full of reports: here they opened a fashion salon, there a dietologist offers consultations about how women can be slim. All that's fine. But if you are going to think really seriously about women, then you have to start from work conditions."<sup>14</sup>

Women workers' experience under *perestroika* has so far often been discouraging. There are many reports that pressures to reduce personnel exerted by the new "cost accounting regime" are leading first of all to the unjust dismissal of women with small children, as well as older workers, these being the least productive. (The law permits women to be absent from work to care for sick children.) As one woman complained to *Rabotnitsa*: "Perestroika is not only for personnel reductions and dismissals, but also compassion and sensitivity towards people."<sup>15</sup> The right of women with small children to work part-time without management's agreement is generally not respected by management. Many

women have not even heard of this right.<sup>16</sup> And not only is women's night work not being reduced, but state and trade-union authorities appear to have shelved the issue, now that the government, as part of the reform, is encouraging enterprises to move to three shifts in order to make more efficient use of productive capacity.<sup>17</sup>

The present reform does not address itself to job segregation, vertical or horizontal. Many abuses have been occurring in the course of the review of skill classifications that is part of the wage reform. Management arbitrarily demotes entire groups of workers: for example, all men are placed in the fifth grade and women in the third. When the women complain, they are told openly that they are women, and men's skill grade should be two higher than women's. Similarly, the legal right of women with small children to study to raise their skill grade during work hours is simply ignored by management.<sup>18</sup>

If the economic reform offers nothing for women as workers, what of the officially proclaimed "self-management" and "democratization" that are said to be integral parts of *perestroika*? Unfortunately, with some rare exceptions, these have yet to materialize. Nor have the trade unions reformed themselves: numerous reports decry their continuing solidarity with management and passivity when it comes to enforcing legal norms and improving conditions.<sup>19</sup> As for the revival of the women's councils, judging from the trade-union press, they have had little impact in the factories. It is telling that their voice, like that of the trade unions, has not been heard on the issue of night work, now that official policy calls for its extension.<sup>20</sup>

If women workers have not yet benefited as workers in any material sense from *perestroika*, the political liberalization is without doubt an important gain (though lacking in guarantees), since it opens the way for women to a more critical understanding of their situation and to the consciousness of the necessity to seek collective solutions that correspond to their interests, rather than passively placing their hopes in the present leadership. (On International Women's Day 1988, during Gorbachev's visit to a Moscow ball-bearing plant, half of whose workers are women, none of the issues

raised related specifically to women.)<sup>21</sup> The current reform, designed and promulgated from above in an authoritarian manner, based upon deepening socio-economic differentiation and increasing dependence upon market criteria of rationality to guide social development, offers little that is attractive to the vast majority of women workers. The same is true for the working class as a whole, whose shared interests indeed call for a fundamental restructuring of the economy, but one that places democracy at the centre of the economic system, with social solidarity, based upon democratic decision-making and a real concern for social justice, gradually becoming the fundamental motivating factors of economic actors.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Zhenshchina v zerkale statistiki," *Agitator*, (no. 3, 1988), p. 33.

<sup>14</sup>*Trud* (March 3, 1988), plenum of the Central Committee of the Trade Union of Light and Textile Industries.

<sup>15</sup>I. Chernyak, "Kto v rabochie poidet?" *Sobesednik* (no. 29, July, 1988), p. 13.

<sup>16</sup>N.V. Dogle, *Usloviya zhizni i zdorov'e tekstil'shchiks*, (Moscow, 1977), pp. 77-93.

<sup>17</sup>G. Bilyalitinova, "Ne zhenskaya nosha," *Pravda* (June 6, 1988).

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, "Zhenshchina v zerkale statistiki."

<sup>19</sup>Tsyachi tyazhelykh kirpichei," *Nedelya* (no. 6, 1989), p. 24; "Osvobozhdennyi trud na khozraschete," *Sobesednik* (no. 23), p. 6.

<sup>20</sup>Tsyachi tyazhelykh kirpichei."

<sup>21</sup>Bilyalitinova, "Ne zhenskaya nosha."

<sup>22</sup>A. Levina, "Tsyacha i odna noch'," *Rabotnitsa* (no. 4, 1988), p. 12.

<sup>23</sup>S. Kaidash, "K voprosu o zhenskom voprose," *Moskovskie novosti* (Aug. 8, 1988), p. 13.

<sup>24</sup>D. Akivis, "Materinstvo i 'otchestvo'," *Rabotnitsa* (no. 6, 1988), p. 21.

<sup>25</sup>*Izvestiya* (Mar. 8, 1988).

<sup>26</sup>Bilyalitinova, "Ne zhenskaya nosha."

<sup>27</sup>See, for example, *Trud* (May 14, 1989), p. 2; report of the working group on employment of the All-Russian Trade-Union Council and State Committee on Labour, *Rabotnitsa* (no. 10, 1988), p. 1.

<sup>28</sup>O svoikh l'gotakh," *Rabotnitsa* (no. 1, 1988), p. 20.

<sup>29</sup>Levina, "Tsyacha i odna noch'."

<sup>30</sup>Operatsiya 'stupeni masterstva'," *Rabotnitsa* (no. 10, 1988), p. 17.

<sup>31</sup>See D. Mandel, "Revolutionary Reforms' in Soviet Factories," *Socialist Register 1989* (London: Merlin Press, 1989), pp. 194-221.

<sup>32</sup>Levina, "Tsyacha i odna noch'."

<sup>33</sup>*Pravda* (March 8, 1988).

<sup>34</sup>I have argued this at greater length in "Perestroika and the Working Class," *Against the Current* (May-June 1989), pp. 22-31.

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