Our pre-revolutionary economy employed a vast amount of crude labour-power that was redundant in peasant-agriculture. In terms of the volume and type of work that must be done by unskilled labour over the next year or two, there will be no essential change from pre-revolutionary years (seasonal agricultural labour for landowners has virtually ended, and the same can be said of work in capital-construction, but there is an increase in the volume of labour needed to procure timber and peat and to ensure the timely repair of transportation that has been destroyed in the Civil War). To avoid crude mistakes while mobilising unskilled labour in one form or another, we must start from the distribution of labour-power that prevailed in our economy immediately prior to the revolutionary years.

Before the Revolution, unskilled labour was mobilised by capitalism and by the state in two ways: either in the form of hiring unskilled workers who were completely or almost completely detached from the land, or else in the form of peasants who sold their labour during time freed from agriculture.

The Soviet authority can mobilise the main mass of crude manpower in these same two forms. It would be a mistake, however, to have any illusions concerning the possibility that a large part of the work could

1. [From Pravda, 30 March 1920.]
be done by a permanent army of workers completely detached from agriculture. There are even fewer grounds for thinking that the labour of a worker who is mobilised by the state and receiving rations and clothing from the state would be economically better than that of peasants who are enlisted for work but who still remain attached to their farms. An army of permanent workers is dependent on the state for food, but the state already lacks bread for skilled workers.

An army of seasonal workers and peasants depends, for the most part, on its own bread. An army of permanent workers requires clothing, the construction of housing, the organisation of an enormous supply-apparatus, and so on. An army of seasonally working peasants can make do with their own clothing, and often with their own tools. In a word, it would not be the least bit sensible for us to construct a permanent army of labour in circumstances where the same work might be done by assigning labour to the peasantry. Hence, the conclusion is to use the army for labour when it already lives at state-expense and cannot, for military reasons, be disbanded, but also to avoid any delay in demobilising peasants from the army when, on military grounds, their units can be disbanded. It is more advantageous to us to acquire the same volume of labour from this section of the peasantry through labour-assignments.2

In a backward country such as Russia, economic experiments must be undertaken with great care. By the same token, one must study very closely the experiments already undertaken. The outstanding success in procuring timber in Vyatka province both last year and this year (this year six hundred and twenty thousand cubic feet were collected, and four hundred thousand were shipped out) is a clear example of the enormous usefulness of the method of assignments (in this case, each labour-unit was assigned the task of procuring a specific quantity of wood). The peasantry prefer this method, saying to themselves that ‘once the work is done, we’re through with the treasury and we’re free’. From this perspective, the third thesis of the Central Committee, concerning economic construction3 and the mobilisation of unskilled labour, was not appropriately formulated. To begin with, it is necessary to distinguish between the two types of labour-mobilisation that I have mentioned above. Secondly, it must be emphasised that it is economically more important for our economy, in coming years, to have labour-conscription in the form of labour-assignments, not in the form of labour by standing armies. On the scale of our economy as a whole, only that portion of the work that, for one reason or another, cannot be assigned to the labour-force in the countryside – and

2. [‘путем трудовой разверстки’].
3. [Apparently the reference is to the Ninth Congress of the RKP(B). An account of the opening of the Congress was published in the same issue of Pravda.]