ARTICLES

FREDERICK C. GIFFIN (Tempe, Ariz., U.S.A.)

The "First Russian Labor Code":
The Law of June 3, 1886*

The imperial Russian autocracy of the 1880's has been characterized by some scholars as rather gloomy and lethargic, as inescapably bound to old forms and procedures, to old traditions and prejudices. Yet it was during the 1880's that the government of Emperor Alexander III enacted a body of fairly extensive laws designed to improve the conditions of factory labor. The most comprehensive of these laws was that of June 3, 1886. Often referred to as the "First Russian Labor Code," it prescribed the terms and procedures under which the factory owner could hire labor, directed that wages be paid at least once a month, prohibited payment in kind and the charging of interest on advances made to workers, created new supervisory agencies in major industrial centers, and introduced several other improvements in the factory system. An examination of the origins and content of this important enactment not only indicates that Alexander's government was neither ignorant of nor unresponsive to the needs of the workers, but also provides outstanding evidence of some enlightened reforming zeal in tsarist officialdom.

Working Conditions in Russia's Factories and Mills

Earlier regulatory measures notwithstanding,1 working conditions in Russian industrial establishments of the mid-1880's left much to be desired.2 A fourteen-hour day was normal (although an eighteen-hour day was not uncommon), labor on Sundays and

* Preparation of this study was supported by a faculty grant from Arizona State University.
1. A law of June 1, 1882, had forbidden the employment of children under twelve, limited the working day to eight hours for workers aged twelve to fourteen, and provided for a system of periodic factory inspections. A second law, enacted on June 12, 1884, had extended the system of factory inspection and made provisions for the education of child workers. By a third law, adopted on June 3, 1885, night work in textile mills was prohibited for women and young people under seventeen. The complete texts of these laws are printed in Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii [hereafter PSZ], Third Series, 33 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1886-1916), II, 265-266; IV, 366-368; V, 261. Earlier legislation—and its ineffectiveness—is discussed in R. E. Zelnik, Labor and Society in Tsarist Russia: The Factory Workers of St. Petersburg, 1855-1870 (Stanford, 1971). See also two articles by F. C. Giffin: "In Quest of an Effective Program of Factory Legislation in Russia: The Years of Preparation, 1859-1880," The Historian [hereafter H], XXIX, 2 (February 1967), 175-185, and "The Prohibition of Night Work for Women and Young Persons: The Russian Factory Law of June 3, 1885," Canadian Slavic Studies, II, 2 (Summer 1968), 208-218.
2. On working conditions at this time, see the following: S. P. Turin, From Peter the Great to Lenin: A History of the Russian Labour Movement with Special Reference to Trade Unionism (London, 1935); Ia. T. Mikhaïlovskii, O deiatel'nosti fabrichnoi inspektii: otchet za 1885 god glavnogo fabrichnago inspektora (St. Petersburg, 1886); M. I. Tugan-Baranovskii, Rosskaia fabrika v proshlom i nostoiaschem, 7th ed. (Moscow, 1938); A. A. Mikulin, Fabrichnaia inspektii v Rossii, 1882-1906 (Kiev, 1906); and K. A. Pazhitnov, Polozhenie rabochago klassa v Rossii, (St. Petersburg, 1906).
holidays was widespread, and both sanitary and safety conditions were appalling. Protective measures against extreme temperatures, dust, dampness, steam, and poisonous gases in the workshops were virtually non-existent. Factory lodgings were badly overcrowded—men, women, and children sleeping together in the same room—and insects were so numerous in many barracks that during the summer the workers often chose to sleep out of doors. In some factories there were no special sleeping quarters at all, and the workers slept on the floor, on work benches, in basements, even in closets.

Written labor contracts existed in only a few factories; in most cases there were simply verbal agreements. Workers ordinarily were punished for quitting their jobs but could be arbitrarily dismissed by the management before the end of the agreed term of employment.

The wages of the workers, though high compared to what was being earned in wage labor in the Russian countryside, were considerably lower than those paid factory laborers in England, Germany, and the United States. Foremen or masters generally received twenty-five to thirty rubles a month, while ordinary workers were paid fifteen to seventeen rubles—an amount barely sufficient to provide for the most basic necessities of life. The evil of low wages was compounded by the fact that they were commonly paid at undetermined intervals, sometimes only two or three times a year. For example, in only 71 of the 181 factories inspected in Moscow province during 1882-1883 were the workers paid according to an established schedule.

In all instances the owner of the factory was an absolute sovereign, who often interpreted and applied existing legal regulations as he saw fit. The workers had to obey him implicitly. "Without rights and lacking individuality [they] had none of the means usual in Europe . . . to express their wishes and announce demands to the owners." Trade unions were prohibited under article 318 of the penal law of 1874, which imposed sentences of exile or imprisonment on "those organizing a society which stimulated hatred between employers and workers." The practice of search was quite common as was the beating of workmen by foremen. Often the police collaborated with industrialists in measures to ensure "order" in the factories, and occasionally Cossack detachments were sent at request. Moreover, since 1880 employers had enjoyed the right to

3. The wages of American workers at the beginning of the 1880's were reportedly from one hundred to four hundred percent higher than those of their Russian contemporaries. In England, according to the investigations of G. P. Bevan and Edward Young, men's wages were from fifty to four hundred percent higher than in Russia. I. I. Ianzhul, "Fabrichnyi byt Moskovskoi gubernii: otchet za 1882-1883 gg. fabrichnago inspektora nad zaniatiiami maloletnikh rabochikh Moskovskago okruga" (St. Petersburg, 1884), p. 115. Raymond W. Goldsmith points out that as late as 1913 real income per head in Russia "was only about one-third as high as in the United States or the United Kingdom . . . and about one-half as high as in Germany . . . ." Goldsmith, "The Economic Growth of Tsarist Russia, 1860-1913," Economic Development and Cultural Change, IX, 3 (April 1961), 443.


5. By way of comparison, payment by the week prevailed in England at this time. A. N. Bykov, Fabrichnoe zakonodatel'stvo i razvitie ego v Rossii (St. Petersburg, 1909), pp. 172-173.


9. According to James Mavor, "up till 1905 each workman was searched on leaving the factory for tools or goods which he was presumed to be desirous of stealing," An Economic History of Russia, 2 vols. (London and Toronto, 1914), II, 413.