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Letters - 1965

TUESDAY, AUG. 10, 1965, SAIGON.

Emil Lindahl, USOM labor advisor, has been readying a labor program for use here that looks very good. A former I.U.E. organizer from Long Island, big and blue-eyed, a man out of the shops, he has arrived here recently from India, his permanent station. Apparently, last May, President Johnson ordered that the best men in each area of USOM activity, should be moved into Viet Nam. Lindahl, who feels that the "dollar economists" tend to oppose labor programs on the ground that they are countervailing forces in the drive toward industrialization, is a somewhat frustrated man, but he has hopes that much can be done here. He showed me his program in considerable detail.

Vietnamese workers are literate and actually do read. USIS material has a circulation of 300,000. The labor unions now have their own weekly newspaper, the printing press for which was provided by us. It has been appearing as a full-sized 4-page paper since June 28th, and has a circulation of 20,000 already. It is called "Cong Nhan" (The Worker), and the hope is that it will become a daily before long.

Key problem in labor activity, as Lindahl sees it, is the policy that U.S. activities must go through official government channels -- that is, through the Vietnamese ministries. But to do so would make the unions an officially sponsored agency of the regime and might cripple the effectiveness of their work. (I suspect, however, that the unions would be dubbed an arm of the Americans anyway if they receive facilities directly from us, like the printing press. The real objection to moving through the Vietnamese government is that it delays action and might even sabotage it since it has no great passion for unionism.)

The main organization is the Confederation Vietnamiennne du Travail (usually referred to as CVT. Because it is affiliated with the Christian Federation of unions and not the ICFTU, the AFL-CIO has done very little for it. Its Christian affiliation is odd since its leader, Bui, is himself a Buddhist, and is said to have two wives, which is permitted under Vietnamese law.

Vietnam, as has been noted by many observers, suffers from the fact that the population generally does not identify with a national government. The average person has no contact with Saigon except when the tax collector or the draft official catches up with him. The only two forces for nationalism are the Army and the labor movement. CVT has a national character, cutting across regional, ethnic and religious lines. It is also a laboratory for democracy: workers actually get the experiences of functioning together in the process of making group decisions.

CVT, unfortunately, is not at the level of strength it once had. From a membership of 300,000, the ten nt farmers union fell to 48,000 -- the reason being that Diem, fearing the power of such an organization, took it over as an official government-sponsored agency. However, ~~movement~~ there has been some resurgence since Diem's fall, and prospects are good. Organization is going forward by the Fishermen's Federation (who are important not only because of the food supply but because the ships they work on are being used also by us for food transport in given situations), the Dockers, and the tenant farmers. Their big need, of course, is money to finance organization, to provide an organizer, for example, with a motor scooter so that he can get around.

Lindahl is trying to set up a "Union Leadership and Fellowship Institute", using materials he has developed effectively in India. His series of flip charts on union structure, collective bargaining, ~~etc~~ and organizing skills, with appropriate drawings have already been re-drawn by a local Vietnamese artist with translation of the legends. The program would function on the basis of ~~bringing~~ bringing in the students for three months of training, sending them home for three months to apply what they have learned, then bringing them back again for threemore months of study. Some of

have learned, then bringing them back again for three more months of study. Some of them may even be sent to the Asian Labor Education Center (ALEC) in Manila, which is a branch of the University of the Philippines.

In addition, a "participant program" is in process. Ten participants have been selected to go to the U.S. to see how labor functions there. They should arrive some time in September, and unions will be asked to present their programs on pensions, contracts, etc., in addition to lectures on collective bargaining in the U.S. I suggested to Lindahl that his program, which I scanned, should include at least one session on "Employers' Attitudes Toward Unionism in the U.S." and I invited him to hold that session at the Baruch School, with myself making the presentation.

The participants are not sent to the United States cold. They receive USIS material, some of which I have, including principally an account of unionism in the U.S. and a concise history of the U. S. Each participant is required to answer a questionnaire on the content of these pamphlets, and then a workshop is held prior to departure to clarify errors and misconceptions. In addition, since past experience has shown that participants are often embarrassed by their inability to answer questions about their own country, they are being ~~briefed~~ given material that will arm them with information about Vietnam.

In his approach, Lindahl seeks out parallels between the U.S. and Viet Nam. "We were a colony; you were a colony. We had to ~~fight~~ fight for independence; you have to fight. We needed land reform, and had the Homestead Act; you need land reform." etc., etc.

In connection with the ~~Adult~~ Leadership and Fellowship Institute, I asked Lindahl where he will get the faculty. He has had ~~two~~ two books translated into Vietnamese, one of which is Samuelson's "Economics" textbook, and plans to send ~~them~~ them out to professors, asking for their reactions. From their replies, he will be able to gauge whether their point of view is the kind that would be appropriate for a labor institute.

The job here, however, is not just a matter of labor organization. It is a question of achieving a program of human resource development. "Why put hard-to-get capital into hands that will simply waste it?" Lindahl asks. It is important to teach skills, to get young people to realize that a tool-and-dye maker may be more valuable than a college graduate with no special skill. This has been particularly important in India, where the worker with his hands is regarded as less estimable. Women have to be used to better advantage. Here they do the same kind of work as men. I have myself seen these slender women, weighing about a hundred pounds, carrying 100 kilos (220 lbs.) of corn on their backs. At dinner last night, someone was describing a scene at the docks: two men in a hold load the sack on the woman's back, she climbs a ladder, crosses the gangplank, goes to a truck, where two men unload it.

Lindahl has just returned from Danang (where, incidentally, he saw the bomber that fell as it came down). The port is glutted with material. This is not a labor problem, he says, but a management problem: the people in charge do not know how to manage their workers. Lindahl was asked to come up there because of the difficulty. The cause, he found, was quite simple: as a matter of law, the dock workers are supposed to receive 30 piastres ~~per~~ per ton in Nha Trang. Lindahl says in Nha Trang there is trouble on the docks because, as he found on a personal visit, the dock workers who by law were supposed to be getting 30 piastres per ton (40 cents!) were getting only 18. Since their employers are under contract with us, we have a responsibility for seeing that the law is enforced. Out of the 225 piastres that we pay the contractor to move one ton, the worker gets 18 piastres. We are enriching the contractors while the people are being

exploited in violation of their own law. (I heard the same story about labor laws not being enforced, from John Condon, labor attache here. Recently, an employer's association repudiated a collective bargaining agreement on the ground that its representatives did not have the authority to sign; the workers are striking.)

On the other hand, Dick Critchfield of the Washington Star told me last night that the mayor of Danang has been very cooperative because he is the CVT's man. When the big move of Americans into Danang was announced, the Viet Cong in the area planned to stage a demonstration: they would bring 36 coffins into the town as a kind of warning. But the CVT workers opposed such action, and it did not take place. (Critchfield got this from the mayor. He asks an interesting question: How come the Viet Cong has been so unsuccessful in infiltrating CVT? Even the wretched drivers of the "cyclos" who earn only a few piastres, and who seem to be well organized, do not support the V-C. I have heard that there have been V-C efforts but Buu has succeeded in beating them down.)

Lindahl feels that there is great need for a policy of enforcing labor laws. "The Communists can only promise; we can actually deliver better conditions if we insist on enforcement of the laws," he says. In addition, he argues that we must persuade the government to give new dignity to skilled labor -- for example, by providing for "selective service" in the draft. There is a shortage of dredge operators for the harbor-building program that is now an essential, but dredge operators are not deferred. (The government argues that it can draft them and send them back in uniform.)

Lindahl gave me some insights into similar problems in India. There, he believes, that the Commies will control the unions in five years due to the inadequacy of our current labor program, the unwillingness to offend certain quarters, including the Communists, who object every time we attempt to exert counter-influence. But the people are the ones we must woo. In Vietnam, it is a common utterance that the people want social change: "~~Kek~~ Cach mang" (pronounced Kek Mang) which means revolution but not a Communist or violent one.

I am reading the labor law of Vietnam. It contains many impressive provisions: mandatory severance pay - one month's wages after two years of service; two months after three, etc. (p. 283); half-pay during maternity leave and no discharge (pp. 285, 326); collective bargaining with written contracts (pp. 293 et seq.); arbitration (p. 298); minimum wages (p. 303); equal pay for equal work regardless of sex & or age (p. 304); retention of tips by waiters and hotel employees (p. 306); employee representation as in a shop steward system to allow for grievance procedure (p. 313); a 48-hour week (p. 318); a six-day week (p. 321); paid vacation, called annual leave, for at least 15 days after one year of service (p. 327); health and safety; limitations on child and female labor. There is machinery for the settlement of labor disputes, which I am yet to read.

Some possible lines of action: Lindahl says most valuable film in India has been ILGWU's "With These Hands" by Mort Wishengrad. But he needs money to dub in, with lip sync, in the regional languages. Perhaps Gus Tyler or Sasha Zimmerman can help raise the needed \$5,000.

Efforts might be made to get individual unions to adopt their counterpart unions and send gifts, like a typewriter, a scooter, etc.

For some of Lindahl's work, Use Your Head and Why People Work may be useful. ~~Send~~ Send copies.