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Social “Axis” Theory and Practice: the Chinese Trade Union in the Transition Period

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Abstract: China’s socio-economic is now in an important period of transition. In the process of transition which from the traditional trade unions to the trade unions in the period of transition, the primary instrument of labor-capital relations adjustment has also changed from administrative control to economic contract-adjusted, as well as the pattern that labor relations and labor-capital relations coexist, is one of its manifestations. In the period of transition, China’s trade unions should deal with some important questions such as “what is the trade unions? whose interest does it represent? How to maintain and build it?”. In accordance with national conditions, we can learn from the concrete practice, policy and theory of trade unions movement in western countries, and then establish the trade unions and labor-capital relations theory and policy system with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: Society “axis” theory China’s trade unions in the period of transition All China Federation of Trade Unions(ACFTU)

The trade union movement situation is the barometer and important component of the labor relation, the latter is the “axis” of the modern society. Engels stipulated: “the labor relation, the axis the modern social system rotates around, has been illustrated scientifically the first time here.” “The new tendency”, represented by Marx and Engels, “recognized that the key to the understanding of the whole history of society lies in the history of the development of labor” ; “the second important discovery of Marx is to make clear the labor relation completely.”¹ In this sense, "Capital" which is on the production, circulation and distribution of surplus value, is a theory about labor relation in nature. In recent 140 years , what are new changes, new characteristics and new progress of the Marxist labor relation theory that social “axis” theory? How to study and build up the labor relation and trade union in the socio-economic transition period? How to learn from Western labor relation and union theories? This is a new task. This paper focuses on the transition of Chinese trade

1 "Selected Works of Marx and Engels," the People's Publishing House in 1972 Chinese edition, Volumell,P269; 1995 2nd edition, VolumeIV, P258, 337

unions.

I. Overview

The right to organize is the product of a long and arduous struggle of the working class. Britain is the first country to launch trade union campaign. In the middle of the 18th century, workers organized themselves spontaneously and struggled with the bourgeoisie, till the 1930s established the British mining industry union and the National Unity trade union of industries. In 1799 the British government promulgated “combination acts” (1799), strictly prohibited workers to form unions and imposed at least two months in prison on the violator. In 1871 the British Parliament passed the first "Trade Union Act "(1871) and in 1876 the “Trade Union Act amendment”(1876). The French Parliament repealed in 1864 the ban on assembly and association, enacted till 1884 "Trade Union Act" to recognize the right of workers to organize unions. In the second half of 19th century, major European countries basically had recognized the legitimate status of the trade union.

The United States and Japan lagged behind. Until 1935 the United States Congress passed the "National Labor Relations Act", recognized the right of the trade unions to organize and the freedom of various activities, and set up "National Labor Relations Board". However, "Labor-Management Relations Act" (1947) and "Labor—Management Reporting and Disclosure Act" (1959) impose restrictions on independent trade union rights and freedom. In 1946 Japan formulated the "Trade Union Law."

Marx and Engels supported the joint, cooperation and organizational behavior among the working class. Marx founded the Scottish Federation of agricultural workers (1865) as "an historic event"; and that “as soon asthey (workers) try to organize a regular co-operation between employed and unemployed in order to destroy or to weaken the ruinous effects of this natural law of capitalistic production on their class, so soon capital and its sycophant, Political Economy, cry out at the infringement of the “eternal” and so to say “sacred” law of supply and demand. Every combination of employed and unemployed disturbs the “harmonious” action of this law. But, on the other hand, as soon as (in the colonies, *e.g.*) adverse circumstances prevent the creation of an industrial reserve army and, with it, the absolute dependence of the working-class upon the capitalist class, capital, along with its commonplace Sancho Panza, rebels against the “sacred” law of supply and demand, and tries to check its inconvenient action by forcible means and State interference.”¹ “Condition of the Working Class in England” was the product of Engels’ inspection on the British labor movement, Engels stipulated,” what gives these Unions and

1 “Capital” , Volume I, P640, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1965.

the strikes arising from them their real importance is.....precisely because the Unions direct themselves against the vital nerve of the present social order”¹

The union and labor relation theory of Marx and Engels was the product of the European labor movement during 1940s to 1960s, and the abstract and theoretical summation mainly on the early free capitalist labor relations. In their view, the trade union is the product of the development of mass production to a certain stage, the inevitable result of self-consciousness awakened as the organization of workers to defend their interests. At their old age they had made preliminary study on the early stage monopoly capitalism labor relations, for example, the trade unions, political parties alliance, the establishment of labor party and legislative reforms, which are likely the factors to affect the evolution from capitalism to socialism, and forecasted that the labor antagonistic relationship would no longer exist in the new community.

However, every era has its own new conditions, issues, themes and tasks. We should review the Marxist unions and labor relations theory according to the contemporary socio-economic changes. Overall, the capitalist exploitation of the labor force essentially does not changed, but the internal structure and composition of the working class have changed. The proportion of blue-collar workers decreases gradually; labor income changes definitely. In 1870-1984, in the United States, the share of the labor income in the national income increased from 50% to 70%, the share of the capital income dropped to below 20%; in 1860-1984, in the British, the labor income share in the national income rose from 45% to 70%, the share of capital dropped from 36 % down to 20%. Left-wing scholar of the United States Harry Braverman (1974) is one of "the new left" who were aware of these changes in labor relations early.

Moreover, there have emerged a number of theories and policies on unions, the labor movement and labor relations. British Webber and his wife made industrial democracy and collective bargaining theory. Hawks of the United States founded the five types of trade union theory (business union, uplift unions, revolutionary union, predatory union and dependence union). John R Commons argument that the nature of unions is non-revolutionary—"the trade unions do not have the class consciousness in the socialist revolution sense, but only the awareness of wages with the separation and cooperation sense with the employer class. Polman worked out work awareness theory or awareness lack theory, and stipulated there is a large number of conservative and practical business-unions. In addition, there is countervailing power theory of J. K. Galbraith, Etc.

1 Engels : “Condition of the Working Class in England” , Marx Engels On Britain, Progress Publishers 1953

There are two noteworthy approaches. Some Western scholars deny the confrontation between employers and employees, seizing some new features such as "decentralized stock", "manager revolution", "workers", "welfare state", etc, of contemporary capitalism.

However, we should pay attention to a conservative tendency, involving of so called "compulsory treatments", such as "the State to step down", cutting social welfare, disbanding or buying trade unions originally protecting workers, etc, made or being used by the ruling elites. They identified the existence of trade unions is fundamentally "detrimental to the labor market", accused the union of "breach of the laws of the market" to take "historical-moral factors" into the labor force range. In turn of the century, the trade union movements of the developed countries are at low ebbs to varying degrees, showing the postures of strong capital weak labor and capital attack labor defense. Frenchmen exclaimed: "all classes in French society come back again."¹

It is worth emphasizing that, with the accumulation of several hundred years, Western trade union legislation and policies have been increasingly improved and have been comprehensive, standardized and legally systematic. In the long-term practice there have gradually established sorts of mechanisms, policies and means to regulate the labor relations, mainly including trade union legislation, international labor standards legislation, labor law system (which includes four categories such as coordination of labor relation, labor standard provision, protection of labors and protection of vulnerable groups), collective bargaining and collective agreement, workers participation in management and the tripartite negotiation mechanism of labor disputes including the government, employers and trade unions, etc.

II. The Chinese Trade Unions in the Transition Period

The social development stage for a country with GDP per capita of between 1,000 and 3,000 dollars, generally shows the dualistic characteristics. The turn of the century, China is in the systematic transition period with distinctive dualistic features. It is at such a turning point of a historical milestone. One of its performances: We are shifting from the traditional trade unions of planned economy to the unions in transition period, the regulation of labor relations shifting from the administrative control in the past to economic lease adjustment, as well as both labor relations and employee-employer relations

¹ French "economic issues," the magazine article published in 2771 by Louis Chauvel, entitled "All classes in French society now back again" article. Original editor's Note: "After the end of World War II the strong economic growth of all countries created favorable conditions for the grand emergence of French 'middle class' so that the community of the original class lost significant difference. But from the 1970s economic stagnation in Western countries, there have various species inequalities arisen once again, the social group's original gradually revealed. So, in this context it was claimed: ' All classes in French society now back again ' . "

existing is one of its important features. Therefore, we can learn from Western countries in the trade union movement, the specific practice, policy and theory, in accordance with national conditions, build up the trade union and labor relation theory and policy system of Chinese characteristics.

(1) Distinguish and properly handle labor relations and employee-employer relations, improve labor relations in public ownership economy.

(2) Coordinate the employee - employer relations of China's non-public ownership economy

(3) According to China's national conditions, solve "what is a trade union, which represents who, how to build, maintain what, and how to maintain" these major problems.

(4) On the dilemma that "increase in employment, or to raise wages," "to safeguard the employment rights and interests while safeguarding the interests of the wage distribution". We always adhere to the "priority to employment" concept.

(5) The social security and the social welfare are essential.

III. A Case: Transitional ACFTU

The strongest trade union organization in China is All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), which owns about 200 million members, 1,324,000 grass-roots trade union. It has generally completed or is achieving the transition from the traditional trade union to transitional trade union.

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