

## IN CHINA, MANAGERS WORK

# AMERICAN DESCRIBES CHINESE FACTORY LIFE



*William Hinton is an American who had a rare opportunity to work in a Chinese factory in 1971. A lot of people have asked us what it's like to work in a socialist factory day by day, so when Hinton was in town recently we asked him about his experiences.*

*Hinton has spent quite a bit of time in China. He first went there in 1947, before the end of the socialist revolution, as a tractor technician for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. He spent time in both the Nationalist and Communist areas of China. Later, he helped train the first group of tractor drivers and technicians in socialist China.*

*Hinton has worked in this country as a truck mechanic, carpenter, and farmer. He has also written three books about China which are available at the Worker Unity Center--Fanshen, the story of the changes that took place in the Long Bow village, where Hinton lived for several years during the early stages of the socialist revolution, when land and other wealth was taken from the rich landlords and distributed to the peasants. Iron Oxen is the story of how China's first tractor drivers and technicians were trained, and how the mechanization of agriculture was begun. Turning Point, Hinton's third book, is about the changes wrought by the Cultural Revolution in China--in the factories, the schools and health care facilities--in virtually every aspect of Chinese life.*

My experience in factory work was in the large locomotive works in Peking, which has about 8,000 workers. It's not actually a manufacturing plant, but a repair plant for the whole railroad system of North China. That doesn't really give a good picture of it though because by repair they mean tearing everything completely apart and rebuilding it. And they make any part that's missing. So if they want to build one from scratch, they can. But that isn't their main job.

The plant had a tremendous turmoil before I came, because of the Cultural Revolution. The struggle there involved making the internal relationships in the plant socialist in content. The railroad system in China was nationalized long before the revolution, and had been under public ownership for almost 70 years. But that didn't mean it had any socialist content.

When the Communist Revolution succeeded and Peking was liberated in '49, this plant came under the control of the new Railroad Ministry of the People's Government. At first they looked to the Soviet Union for management and expertise in transforming a large railroad shop into a socialist factory and they imported almost wholesale the methods that had been developed in Russia. But as these methods were used and developed, they didn't satisfy the Chinese as far as really having any socialist content, because they were based a great deal on piecework, incentive pay, and the bonus system. The Russians always used a system of one-man management, and technicians were cut off from the workers and became more and more crystallized as a privileged hierarchy within this plant.

During the Cultural Revolution, the whole thing was overthrown. I was told that the rules for running this plant, which they got from the Soviet Union, weighed 52 pounds. It wasn't that all the rules were bad, but generally speaking it was a system that did not depend on the initiative and the individual capacity of the workers, tended to divide workers because of the struggle for bonuses and incentives, and put management and technicians in opposition to workers.

So they had overthrown this, and in '71, when I came, they were in the process of establishing something quite different. When I worked there it was certainly the most attractive industrial setup I had ever worked in, from the point of view of a worker, I never really worked in big plants, but I did work in truck repair for many years in fairly large shops.

There were no supervisory personnel in the plant. The people in charge were team members. Everyone had a job. If they led their team or their shop or their section, they also worked side by side with those they led. There was no one walking around with a foreman's hat watching people. The head administrator of the plant did spend a lot of time in managerial work, but he also spent one day a week working in the scrap sorting yard, a job he was given because his technique was the lowest in the whole plant. As far as any kind of skill, he didn't have any practical or mechanical skills, but he was a good

administrator. There were a few people whose main work was in the office, but they also worked part time, or some day a week, or some hours each day in production work. There was no one like a foreman or supervisory staff, and then there was a strong emphasis on everyone participating in manual labor. That created a very good atmosphere for work.

Then there was no time clock. But there was no problem of lateness. In fact, we usually reported an hour early because we had study organized by the team and the group. The study is universal in China. People study around their workplace usually, but they might have a study group in their neighborhood. I worked with a group of 10 to 15 people assembling locomotives, and we studied together for an hour each morning before we went to work.

**WHAT KINDS OF THINGS DID YOU STUDY?**

Well, at that particular time the Nixon visit had just been announced, and we were reading the newspaper about the visit and the possible new relationship with the U.S.A. and things like that. Or like right now, I imagine the group I was in is studying the new constitution word by word. And particularly they'll be reading the sentence in there that says, "In some enterprises the form is that of socialist ownership but the reality is that their leadership is not in the hands of Marxists and the masses of worker." Now the plant will be reading this and they'll be saying, "Well is this one of the places where we have this public ownership form but we really don't have socialist relations, where the plant isn't really in our hands and we don't have revolutionary Marxist leadership?" And they'll be discussing things like that as they come up. With a basic document like the new constitution, which covers the whole of their society and restates the values of their society, they would discuss that for weeks.

Well, if the discussion was lively, we didn't always get down to work at 8:00, maybe 8:20. And then we knocked off about a quarter to 12:00, in order to get washed up in time to eat. It wasn't like you worked until the clock strikes 12:00 and then quit. And then either we went to the dining hall, or most of the men brought their own lunch.



There were no women in this particular shop, except the crane operator. But on both sides of us, in the machine shops that fed us parts, at least half of the skilled workers, maybe even 60 percent were women.

Then after lunch we played ping pong. And if the ping pong was lively, we didn't get back at 1:00. We'd stretch it out a little. It was an eight hour day, but if we had our assembly done we sometimes knocked off early in our part and we went out and helped people in the other areas finish their work. There wasn't that kind of pressure you feel in an American plant. Yet under this system we were turning out twice the work that they had ever done historically, with the same number of people and the same equipment. But of course the workers had modified the equipment a great deal during the Cultural Revolution.

There are so many things about factory life. You see the factory operates as a community which is responsible for the families and children of the workers as well as the workers themselves. Everything is organized around the factory. There's a high school that the factory runs, and a technical school at night, adult education, that the factory runs. They have a permanent theatre group, drama group, that puts on major theatrical performances. The workers took turns, men and women, and they'd get full pay, and be released from their jobs six months at a time, to put on these performances. One of the big operas current at that time was about railroad workers, so they were particularly fond of that, and that's the one they were putting on while we were there. They really put their soul into that. There was a hospital connected to the factory, and a clinic, and nursery schools for the kids. So that if you're a worker in that factory, generally speaking your life revolved around it. One of the biggest problems is still the lack of adequate housing near the factory, but the factory is now building new housing for workers and their families, but it will take time.

**DOES ALL THE MONEY FOR THIS COME OUT OF THE EARNINGS OF THE FACTORY?**

Now there you've got me, because I didn't really ask. The factory's responsible for meeting all these needs, but I think all the funds they earn go to the Railroad Ministry. Then I think they get investment funds and housing funds and all the rest from the Railroad Ministry, but it wouldn't necessarily just come out of what they had earned. It comes out of the general allocation of funds that the state had.

**WELL HOW WOULD THE DECISION BE MADE ABOUT HOW MUCH OF THESE FUNDS SHOULD BE USED SAY FOR HOUSING OR HEALTH CARE?**

That decision would be made by the Revolutionary Committee of the factory, which is under the leadership of the Communist Party but includes non-Party members. All of the members of the Revolutionary Committee are elected by the workers in the plant, as are the members of the Party. So the workers really elect the people who make the decisions.

**HOW ABOUT WAGES, THEN? HOW WOULD THAT DECISION BE MADE?**

Well, you see, there are certain norms that are set nationally-basically that's the worker's earnings. Given the situation in China, where you have backward forms of production side by side with advanced ones, if you didn't do this you'd have a situation where workers in highly mechanized plants would earn a lot more than other workers or peasants, because productivity is much higher in the advanced plants. Under the capitalist situation, the owners would grab the benefits of that higher productivity and the workers in the more advanced sectors would grab some too. Like in Berks County where I worked as a union carpenter, and we were getting \$4.70, \$5.00 an hour on industrial construction while all the local carpenters were getting \$2.50. There was a tendency in China on the part of the same trade union people to push for a proportionate share of the actual surplus value they created in their own plant. But the policy of the Party and the Government was that that would be very much out of line, and that there should be a general wage level established for workers, which is fairly even throughout the country from industry to industry, depending on skill. There are eight grades of skill, but within those grades the earnings are pretty well standard. And then the value generated in industry is reinvested, a great deal of it into agriculture, to bring agriculture up, so you don't have ripoff of the peasantry to subsidize more advanced industry.

So they don't actually set wages day to day or year to year. There's an overall national policy on wages. A single plant can't just change the wage system at will. The problems that are arising are discussed and reported up. When we were there there was a general discussion of problems in the wage system, and they were being reevaluated at a higher level. Eventually, the policy was that the wages should be made more even by raising the wages of the lower

grades while the higher grades remained where they were. But they couldn't change the basic wage system plant by plant. There's just too much involved. You know they're getting a share of the property of the whole people in a nationally-owned plant like that, and it would only be possible to adjust it by major decisions.

So it works both ways. One thing is that we have to take the good of the industry and the country into account. And you have to have both a short view and a long view. "Politics in command," which is an important principle in China, means that interests of the class, the interests of the working class as a whole, not just what I can get out of this plant, myself. That's a very strong thing in China-what's good for the class.

**THEN HOW WOULD THE WAGES OF INDIVIDUAL WORKERS BE SET?**

That's not really a problem in China. In the first place, all your medical expense would be cared for by the plant. All medical care is totally free in the industrial sphere. And then, if you were still able to work, suitable work would be found for you. Or if you were totally disabled, you would get a pension of like 80 percent of your earnings. And when you retire, you would get something similar.

**YOU'VE TALKED ABOUT A SITUATION WHERE BASIC NEEDS ARE EITHER FREE OR VERY CHEAP, AND WHERE THERE AREN'T SUPERVISORY PERSONNEL ALWAYS LOOKING OVER YOUR SHOULDER. WE'RE TOLD THAT PEOPLE ARE BASICALLY LAZY AND WON'T WORK UNLESS THEY ABSOLUTELY HAVE TO IN ORDER TO SURVIVE OR HAVE SOMEONE WATCHING THEM CONSTANTLY. YET YOU SAY THAT PRODUCTION HAS INCREASED IN THIS PLANT, HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?**

Well, first I wouldn't want to over-emphasize the free supply, but it is an important part, you know education and medical care and nursery schools. But even there it's not free, because they pay a certain amount for the care of children. And their biggest item of expense is food, I think at least half of the budget. In America, food is not as great a part of the total budget, perhaps because other costs are so damn high. But it is true that because of the security of life, and the cheapness of housing and free medical care and all these things, that generally speaking they have savings. They're not under this pressure, they don't have to get up and work every morning because they won't be able to live if they don't. No, the motive for work is quite different. It's the feeling that you're building a new country, a people's country. There's a national feeling. But there's also in China a very strong sense that the Chinese Revolution is important to the people of the world, and that they should develop production and work hard and prosper so as to be a bastion of the people which is of service to the people. There is a strong strand of internationalism, and many ordinary people will tell you that.

But I think the strongest motive is that they feel the factory is theirs, and that as their economy develops, they will also prosper. These old bonus and incentive schemes that divided them tended to treat them as selfish people who would only work today if you paid them more today. And they rejected that essentially. There are still differences in pay, and there are some incentive schemes still in China, you know where you'll get paid more if you work more, but the basic motivation is the sense that this belongs to us and that as it develops we will all prosper and our children will prosper and the people will prosper.

