

1920

Before the First Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in July 1921 declared the chief aim of the Party to be the organisation of labour, student activists baptised in the fire of the May Fourth Movement of 1919 were already attempting to build bridges with the working class. Among them was Deng Zhongxia. Three months after the May Fourth demonstrations, then twenty-five-year-old Deng organised a cooperative residence that housed about thirty students from Peking University, many of whom would soon join the Communist cause.¹ They shared a common interest in the labour movement and mutual aid, believing that intellectuals should be judged not only on the grounds of scholarship, but also in terms of their participation in labour. As would later become a tenet of Maoism in China and globally, they called for investigations of the living and working conditions of the working class. To raise the workers' class awareness, the students established a 'Labour School for Continuing Education' in Changxindian—the centre for the workshops of the northern section of the Beijing–Hankou railway, quite close to Beijing and employing around one thousand workers. However, they quickly stumbled on the perennial obstacles to organising. Differences in social and cultural backgrounds made it very difficult for the students to connect with the workers.² Zhang Guotao, another student leader who had spearheaded the endeavour, reminisced about his first visit to Changxindian. The workers had warmly welcomed him and his fellow activists, offering the utmost hospitality despite their meagre means, but he was the only one who eagerly ate everything, unfazed by the flies flying around the food. As he recounted half a century later: 'I was the only one who gulped the food down noisily, like the workers, while talking patriotism with them. Perhaps because of my conduct the workers did not create a mental division between me as a student and themselves as workers. I was able to establish an intimate relationship with some of them as a result.'³ The following recollection of a trip to Changxindian was written by Deng Zhongxia on 19 December 1920 and published two days later in Chenbao (晨报) under a pen-name.

A Day Trip to Changxindian

DENG Zhongxia

(Translated by ZHOU Ruixue)⁴

The workers in Changxindian invited us to help with a planning meeting to organise a labour school for continuing education. I woke up early today and, with my three comrades Tailei, Renji, and Guotao, rushed to the West Qianmen railway station, where we took the train to Changxindian. Changxindian is twenty-one kilometres from Beijing, and the train was supposed to arrive around 1 o'clock. It is a large village, with three big factories and 2,500 workers. These factories are managed by the Jinghan Railroad Administration. According to the Railroad Administration, there are three departments: train services, machinery, and railroad maintenance. The four of us were chatting and laughing on the train, so cheerful that the harsh cold weather seemed to have withdrawn. When the train passed the Yongding River, I gazed in the dawn at Lugou bridge, set against a shabby old town. Two or three curtains were swaying in the wind. It was quite beautiful, like a magnificent natural painting. That moment aroused my artistic impulse, and my hands were itching to paint, but sadly I had not brought my painting supplies with me. Also, the train did not stop at the bridge, so I wouldn't have been able to paint anyway. As the train went further, my heart was still attached to the memory of that place. The train arrived at Changxindian, but the scenery of Lugou bridge remained in my heart.

When we got off the train at Changxindian, I saw many famine survivors—men and women, elders and youth—crowded by the station. Their gaunt appearance and shabby clothes stirred the inside of my eyes, and my heart then felt hurt, in painful compassion. I did not know where the good mood that I had chatting on the train and my interest in painting had suddenly gone. My heart was just in great discomfort, as if I were also suffering from starvation and poverty. I pondered how they, the famine survivors, did not have clothes to wear, food to eat, or shelter to live in the freezing snow of the harsh winter. And yet the bureaucrats and politicians were enjoying large buildings, fancy clothes, and luxury food. They also were merrily cuddling their concubines around the fireplace, whereas the famine victims were outside sleeping on the ground, freezing or starving to death. Their pain and pleasure are as distinct as heaven

and earth. Alas, this is truly the most unjust thing in society. Why did they come to be this poor? Who has stolen their property? How could we possibly save them just by donating a little money? I have a word of caution to every gentleman keen to relieve the famine: please broaden your horizons and be concerned about their permanent state of famine and poverty. This requires that we fundamentally dismantle the things that produce social injustice. Everyone should try to resolve this.

The workers at Changxindian saw us arriving and were very welcoming and cordial to us. We saw them as friendly brothers, too, and there was fraternity among the workers themselves. I was rather fond of the solidarity and unity. I often resent how heartless people nowadays in society can be, cheating and battling each other, so the harmony and solidarity among the Changxindian workers gave me infinite hope. Because the warm-hearted worker leader Mr Deng Shouting had opened a citizen school for women, which has made great achievements in recent years, the residents of Changxindian gave him a plaque, on which is written the motto 'Joyfully Educating Students' (乐育英才). Today, he was hosting a feast. There were many men, women, elders, and youth, most of whom were workers. We happened to be there at its height and got a taste of the village social feast, which was much fun. We envied their ways of life as ordinary people and their intimate, bustling habits.

After we ate, the planning meeting began. First, worker leader Mr Mingke announced the procedures to organise this labour school, its current methods, and the meeting agenda for the day. Perhaps because this labour school is organised by the Changxindian workers themselves, the funding is by donation. Next, Mr Guotao explained why it is necessary to start a labour school. Basically, he said, why do we workers have to work diligently every day, and yet still struggle to feed ourselves, whereas those idle bureaucrats, politicians, and capitalists enjoy lavish buildings, clothing, and food? Where does their money come from? What about their clothing and food? It is all from us workers, from our blood and sweat. This is why we have no enjoyment and have become so poor. Now we want to achieve happiness, but that is not possible if we don't have the intellect and knowledge first. Therefore, we are starting this school. Furthermore, education is equal, and everyone has a right to it. Are we workers alone not supposed to receive it? As Adam Smith eloquently put it: 'All men are created equal.' Therefore, we have to know that workers have the same status as the capitalists and should enjoy the same level of education and happiness. While he was speaking, all the workers present

were nodding as if to show emotional approval and awareness of his words. The labour school will probably host its commencement meeting on 1 January 1921 and will start classes on the fifth. That day will most likely be bustling with excitement.

After the meeting, a few worker leaders gave us a tour of each factory. Because today is the weekend, most of the workers were not working. Due to special circumstances such as their poverty or not understanding the point of resting, a small number of workers were still working. They work around ten hours in winter and eleven or twelve hours in summer. The wages vary, depending on the project and the individual, from 0.3 yuan to 1 yuan. Overtime in the evening used to be paid at 25 percent more than ordinary time, but now it is paid at the same rate. (I heard that the workers in Tangshan southern factory have already gone on strike since the sixteenth because of this situation.) Living costs per month for workers range from 3 or 4 yuan to 15 or 16 yuan (for those who have family). We visited a place where many bricks were on the ground, and I asked whether they were supposed to be used to build something. One worker smiled and replied: 'We have had these bricks for six years already. They said they will be used to build a hospital for us workers. You see that newly built small house over there? But they have not started on the rest of the buildings in six years.' I said jokingly: 'Wouldn't it be convenient for you all to get sick [if the hospital is built]?' He responded: 'Don't you know the dark side of this? Thank heavens we have not been sick. If we do get sick, they will not treat us; they will say either that we don't have the disease or that they don't have the medication. Only if you have status can you get a bit of medicine!' I was outraged hearing this. I warned the Railroad Administration: you absolutely have to take care of the workers' happiness. Do not spend a large amount of tax revenue and hardly any of it for workers living in poverty.

The workers in Changxindian are intelligent and united. They are already organised into strong collectives and publish a journal called *Voice of Labour* (劳动音), each issue of which sells more than 2,000 copies.

Unfortunately, I do not have training in machinery, so I cannot write about any lessons that I learned after touring the factories. I only remember that one factory was for maintaining steamers, one for fixing machines, and the other for making iron bars; inside the general engine, we saw countless belts and wires. Each worker gave me explanations and I truly appreciate the knowledge that I acquired from them. At 5.50pm, we took

the train back to Beijing. When passing Lugou bridge, the scene of natural beauty had already been covered by the dark haze of night. I could not see it again and was disappointed.