

NATIONAL LIBERATION, SOCIALISM AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST WORK: The Case of Vietnam

Philip Mattera

The struggle of the Vietnamese people against the U.S. and its surrogates in Indochina has been one of the most crucial political phenomena in recent history. The astounding victory over the sophisticated U.S. military machine has not only given encouragement to revolutionary movements throughout the so-called Third World, but has also acted as a catalyst for the wave of struggle by young workers in the schools and factories of North America and Western Europe over the past 15 years. All of us involved with *Zerowork*, undoubtedly as well as most of you reading it, gained much of our political education in the antiwar movement.

It is now two years since the military aspect of the Vietnam struggle came to a successful conclusion with the liberation of Saigon. The country has been reunified, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has been declared. Throughout the world, Vietnam is being heralded as a decisive victory over imperialism. But now that the victory celebration is over and Vietnam is getting down to business, we must ask what sort of business it is getting down to. What does it mean to say that imperialism has been defeated in the country? And what is the nature of the system that is taking its place?

The usual response is that the defeat of imperialism means the triumph of national liberation and socialism. This is said to mean, first, an end to colonialism: the campaign for Vietnamese independence and true national sovereignty, which was fulfilled in 1954 north of the 17th Parallel, has now been achieved for the entire country. The second aspect is said to mean an end to neo-colonialism: economic dependence on Western capital has been fully smashed and the country is now free to develop. It is on these bases that the watchwords of the Vietnamese revolution are said to be Patriotism and Production.

It is undoubtedly true that the Vietnamese people were struggling for an end to foreign domination, but what is not so clear is that they were struggling to make possible the kind of development now being imposed by the regime. In fact, there have already been

indications of a growing crisis in Vietnam, resulting from opposition between working class demands for significant improvements in and greater power over the conditions of life, and the efforts by the Party and the state to promote rapid accumulation of capital. It is beginning to appear that the struggle of the Vietnamese working class is going beyond the struggle for "Third World socialism"--coercive, labor-intensive production as the price for eliminating poverty--and is emerging as a struggle against the accumulation of capital itself (even in its socialist form): in other words, a struggle against work. The aim of this article is to trace the evolution of this struggle from its beginnings in the resistance to the development imposed by the French to the conflicts within the revolutionary regimes themselves, first in the north and now in the entire country. The significance of this history is greater for the situation in Vietnam is indicative of a new form of international working class struggle that is posing a severe crisis for capitalism and socialism alike.

THE FIGHT AGAINST "CIVILIZATION"

The modern era of working class struggle in Vietnam began with resistance to the "civilizing mission" of the French. The Vietnamese peasants had, even before the European colonial period, a long history of opposition to both the indigenous aristocracy and that of China, which ruled Vietnam (with some interruptions) from 111 B.C. to 1427 A.D. The continuation of this tradition into the period of Western penetration was clearly one of the main causes of the long delay in the consolidation of French control--as is suggested in this comment by a French observer in 1864: "The resistance center is everywhere, subdivided *ad infinitum* nearly as many times as there were living Annamese. It would be more exact to regard each peasant fastening a sheaf of rice as a center of resistance."¹ After the French finally gained complete "authority" with the 1883 Treaty of Protectorate, peasant resistance intensified in opposition to the colonial administration's establishment of government monopolies on alcohol, salt, and opium. It was through these monopolies and the harsh penalties for violators that the French obtained the capacity for direct manipulation of the standard of living of the Vietnamese and appropriated the funds (supplemented by those from the notorious *impot personnel*, or head tax) to finance grandiose "public works" projects. Opposition to this brutal fiscal policy culminated in the massive uprisings of March and April of 1908, in the course of which large demonstrations were held and tax collectors were attacked and executed.

The resistance forced the French to make some concessions, such as reforms in the health and justice systems, but the administration pushed forward with its other assault on the peasants: the concentration of land ownership. The French strategy consisted of two movements: the expansion of arable land and the transfer of ownership of this, as well as much of the previously cultivated acreage, to French and a few wealthy Vietnamese landlords. It has been estimated that land appropriation and concessions by the administration amounted to some 900,000 hectares--more than 40 percent of the

cultivated surface--with the result that in Tonkin (northern Vietnam), for example, about .1 percent of the total landholders ended up owning 17 percent of the cultivated land.² The result for "the economy" was that rice became a major export commodity, with the total sold abroad rising from only 57,000 tons in 1860 to 1,548,000 tons in 1937.³ The result for the peasants was a rapid decline in their level of consumption, as the French used heavy taxation (in kind) and low prices paid to small producers to maximize the total rice available for export. Joseph Buttinger shows that per capita rice consumption fell from 262 kilograms in 1900, to 226 kilograms in 1913, and down to 182 kilograms in 1937. (About 220 to 270 kilograms a year is considered the minimum necessary to sustain an adult.) And he goes on to declare: "Under this system, the alternative for the small peasant was not either pay [high taxes and high interest rates] or starve: There was no real alternative. In order for the landlords to remain rich and for the French to profit from the export of rice, the majority of the impoverished rural population had to pay *and* starve."⁴

This process of primitive accumulation created a huge labor force of peasants forced off their land. Some went from being small landholders to being tenant farmers, sharecroppers, or agricultural laborers; but the miserable conditions of these groups, too, led many to seek to live on the margins of society. This created a serious vagrancy problem for the French, who responded in a number of ways, including the shipping of 100,000 Vietnamese to France during World War I to serve as manual laborers in the armed forces and defense industries. Yet, even actions such as this did not deter the resistance of the *tadien*--the landless rural proletariat--who rose up repeatedly against the colonial administration.

It was thus only through sheer force that the French were able to direct much of this surplus labor into what became, aside from rice growing, the major industries of Vietnam: the coal mines and the rubber plantations. The French introduced rubber into Vietnam from Malaya in 1897, and at about the same time they began to exploit the rich coal deposits at Hong Hai, near Haiphong in the north. Because of the large number of peasants who made themselves unavailable for work on the plantations and in the mines, the French were forced to use more than the promise of a wage to obtain their workforce. Buttinger writes: "Labor for plantations and mines was hard to get because peasants would rather be unemployed and hungry in their native villages than be turned into slaves on rubber plantations...-Consequently, forced labor, or corvee, as the French called it, although legally abolished by the colonial regime, flourished under the French as never before."⁵ Mandarins in the service of the French were empowered to enlist forcibly large numbers of men from each village; but as the resistance to work was maintained, the mine and plantation owners tried using the Cambodians, the Laotians, and the various ethnic minorities in Vietnam, such as the Muongs and the Mois--yet, soon, these groups too gained reputations for being "unreliable" and "very reluctant to work."⁶

The next step was the use of native labor agents (*cai*) and the contract labor system. The agents used all forms of deception and co-

ercion to get peasants to sign three-year contracts, during which time the peasant became enslaved to both the plantation or mine owner and the agent himself. After collecting his commission from the owner, the agent forced the "coolie" to borrow money from him at exorbitant interest rates and purchase food and medical supplies from him at astronomical prices. The working conditions themselves were savage: the working day was at least 10-12 hours; health care was at first nonexistent and later completely inadequate; the mortality rate was extremely high; and wages were minimal, the French owners claiming that efforts to raise the daily pay of 2.5 francs would "spoil the coolies by killing their incentive to work." The owners also paid workers as infrequently as possible, and in 1927 they pressured the colonial administration to permit them to withhold up to five percent of wages, supposedly to "protect the workers against their own improvident habits and their tendency to squander their earnings on games of chance." 7

Resistance to all this took many forms. Some workers, desperate to escape from the hellish conditions of the plantations and mines, resorted to self-mutilation to make themselves unfit to work. A much larger phenomenon was desertion: the rate at which workers "breached their contracts" rose steadily in the early 1900's, reaching

Robberies of the wealthy and seizure of their property by bands of peasants became an everyday occurrence.

a high of about 50 percent in the 1920's with the burgeoning of a black market in forged identity cards and workbooks. Some workers abandoned the job as soon as they saw the miserable conditions, while others simply didn't return from their short Lunar New Year vacation at home. An indication of the extent of absenteeism and desertion is seen in the fact that in order for plantation owners in the south to maintain a workforce of 22,000 they had to recruit more than 75,000 "coolies" between 1925 and 1930. 8 Similarly, in the principal mines of Tonkin in 1936, of 24,000 workers employed, 18,000 had been working less than five months. 9 This large-scale refusal of work also served to increase the power of those who remained in the plantations and mines. In order to prevent everyone from abandoning, the French were compelled to improve conditions and pay, with the result that the index of wages rose 25 percent between 1925 and 1930. 10

THE "RED TERROR"

The struggles of Vietnamese workers in the rice fields, the plantations, the mines, and the factories came together in the "red terror" of the 1920's and 1930's. The main thrust of this was in the countryside, where agricultural workers began to undertake more and more daring actions against the landlords. Robberies of the wealthy and seizure of their property by bands of peasants became an everyday occurrence, so much so that the French administration was

forced to step up substantially its means of social control to cope with this banditry. In Cochinchina (southern Vietnam), for example, the colonial police budget jumped from 7.7 million francs in 1919 to 20.7 million in 1929. ¹¹ In fact, the peasants were threatening the very foundation of social relations in the countryside by attacking and seizing the rice crop and the storehouses. A contemporary report indicated that "Tenants and laborers often confiscated the major part of the crop before the harvest or attacked the granaries of local landowners. Attempts to stop them met stiff resistance--so much so that many landowners left home each night for nearby towns where they could sleep under the protection of the colonial militia." ¹²

In 1930, the struggle began to take on mass dimensions as revolts occurred in Cochinchina and Annam (central Vietnam). The revolts were all eventually suppressed, but they severely undermined the bases of French rule. The most powerful of the rebellions took place in Nghe-An and Ha-Tinh provinces in the narrow lowlands of central Vietnam, where the French administration was replaced by *soviets* for as long as nine months.

The first phase of these uprisings centered on resistance to the colonial fiscal policy, especially the head tax and other levies and the monopolies on alcohol, salt, and opium. Large demonstrations were held in the cities--bringing together rural and urban workers--during which government offices were destroyed, tax officials were attacked, cadastral records were burned, and government storehouses were sacked. Then, once these struggles gained a certain momentum, the focus of the revolt became explicitly one of appropriation, meaning not only the refusal to pay taxes, rents, and debts, but also the large-scale seizure of food and other goods from the state and the wealthy; in other words, seizure not of the means of production, but of the means of existence.

All of this indicated the extent to which a bona fide working class had emerged in Vietnam and was making generalized wage demands in both the cities and the countryside. The peasants--whether they were agricultural laborers, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, or small landholders--no longer had a peripheral relation to capital. The French administration's use of taxation, corvee, manipulated prices, etc. established a clear class relation between the peasants and the state. Moreover, the use of land expropriation and the propulsion of the rural population into the labor market destroyed the "feudal" nature of that relation and turned it into one between capital and labor. The French used landlessness, along with the impoverishment of those who managed to hold onto a few hectares, to manipulate rural labor-power and have it serve as a reserve army to help control the wages of those already forced into the plantations, mines, and factories. It is in this sense that even those without a wage were put into a wage relation to and a wage struggle with capital.

This struggle took several forms. First, there was the struggle of the wageless for the wage itself--not for the joy of being truly productive, but for the additional power the wage provided vis-a-vis capital. It was not so much a struggle to enter the factories as it was a struggle to escape the uncertain and miserable conditions of the "Surplus population." At the same time, the struggle took the form

of a demand for land--not for the sake of returning to an idyllic feudalism, but for achieving some degree of autonomy from the capitalist labor market. Ownership of some land made it more feasible for people to make themselves unavailable for work in the plantations, mines, and factories--all the more so since the land demand went along with the continuing struggle against taxation, corvee, etc. The most advanced struggle was the one we mentioned in connection with the uprisings of the 1930's--a form of struggle

[The struggles] all aimed at the same goal: to undermine the accumulation of capital being imposed by the French and replace it with the accumulation of the power of the working class.

requiring a great deal of class power--namely, the mass appropriation of social wealth. The demands of rural workers for land or for the wage, the demands of plantation, mine, and factory workers for higher wages and shorter hours, and the demands of all workers for more wealth and less work all aimed at the same goal: *to undermine the accumulation of capital being imposed by the French and replace it with the accumulation of the power of the working class.*

SOCIALISM AND SOCIALIST EXPLOITATION

It was during the 1930's that the Communists began to appear on the political scene in Vietnam. They started out as a group of individuals sympathetic to the Soviet Union, announcing themselves with a 1929 manifesto that declared: "We want to hand over the factories to the workers, rice fields to the peasants, the sources of revenue to the people, and power to the assemblies of representatives of all the working classes of the nation." But the pressure of the Comintern line was soon felt, and at a congress only one year later--when the Indochina Communist Party was founded--they declared that Vietnam was not ripe for such a revolution and must first undergo a "bourgeois, democratic" one. The vagaries of political ideology aside, the Communists in the 1930's did support the struggles of the working class, and this enabled Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh (which the Communists dominated) to assume leadership of the resistance movement during the Japanese occupation. The chaos during this period increased the appeal of Communist leadership, especially in the north. For the Japanese continued the French policy of seeking the maximum exploitation of Vietnamese labor, particularly in agriculture. Much of the rice land was converted to jute and other war-related crops, while occupation troops scoured the countryside at harvest time to collect as much rice as they could get away with. This policy, combined with the serious typhoons and resulting food shortages, led to widespread famine in Vietnam in

1943-1945. The most serious situation came about near the end of the war: "Starvation began in October 1944 and before the spring harvest in 1945 as many as two million Vietnamese had perished." 13

Following the defeat of Japan, the Vietminh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in September 1945 and undertook a number of progressive measures to abolish some of the forms of French oppression: the hated monopolies on alcohol, salt, and opium were done away with; the head tax was ended and other levies were greatly reduced; utilities were nationalized; the eight-hour day was established; and wage levels were increased. And once Vietminh rule in the north was solidified by the military victory over the French and the Geneva Accords, the DRV embarked on a comprehensive land reform program. Yet it soon became clear that this policy was not designed to meet the land demands of the working class, but to pave the way for "socialist development," meaning Soviet-style rapid industrialization by exploiting agricultural workers to the maximum. Le Duan, now First Secretary of the Vietnam Workers Party (*Lao Dong*) and chief theoretician of the north, has described the intentions of the Communists in this way: "Under the conditions of our country, our Party considers socialist industrialization, with heavy industry playing the decisive role, to be the central task all through the period of the transition to socialism...The struggle between the capitalist and socialist paths in the North of our country is primarily a struggle to raise small production to the level of large-scale production." 14

The first step by the DRV while still fighting the French was the tax reform of 1952, which simplified the system of levies, but imposed an agricultural tax of five to 45 percent, with a surcharge of 15 percent for village expenditures. This placed a heavy burden on landholders--especially the richer peasants, but also those with modest acreage. One observer claims that the government ended up taking an average of more than 40 percent of a family's income in the form of paddy (unthreshed rice). 15 The DRV followed this with the Land Rent Reduction Campaign of 1953-1954 and the Land Reform Campaign of 1954-1956. These campaigns were aimed at suppressing the wealthiest of the landlords and were promoted by the Party with the slogan: "Depend completely upon the poor and landless peasants, unite with the middle-level peasants, seek an understanding with the rich peasants, and liquidate the landlords." The Party and the state put enormous pressure on the people to carry out these programs, with the result that an orgy of recriminations swept upon the country. Some observers, particularly rightwing ones, claim that 50,000 people were executed in the campaigns and 100,000 were arrested and sent to forced labor camps. 16 Many of these same writers also claim that the total redistribution of land, animals, and farm implements had a minor impact on the living conditions of the majority of peasants.

It is difficult in subjects such as this to separate out fact from the morass of ideology and propaganda, but what seems clear is that the main importance of the land reform process was not the exact number of hectares redistributed or even the number of people executed or jailed, but the role of this process in the development of the class

relations between the rural proletariat and the state. To begin, there is no doubt that land reform as it was carried out served to exacerbate the divisions within the Vietnamese population. The positive side of this was the movement to eliminate the remaining wealthy landlords, who were maintaining the same oppressive conditions in the countryside as existed under the French. At the same time, the campaign brought out the divisions within the working class itself. The fiercest antagonisms were often between the landless peasants and those with small holdings, while the entire rural workforce became further divided from the growing industrial workforce in the cities, which found itself in a better position to demand wage increases from the state.

When these divisions did not disappear as the land reform process continued, widespread struggle came to be directed against the Party and the state, since it was becoming more and more apparent that the campaign was merely a prelude for collectivization. Such a transformation of rural production was opposed as strongly as was the land expropriation under the French, for collectivization meant being recomposed into large units that eliminated the forms of class organization and power bases built during decades of struggle against the colonialists. The strategy of the DRV was to "kill the spirit of ownership" by "kill(ing) a few landlords in every village and frighten(ing) *the whole population*." 17 The rural working class may have been frightened at first, but it soon turned rebellious. This was anticipated by the DRV, and in 1956 the Party put an end to the period in which "the masses had been given a free hand" in the land reform program. A Rectification of Errors Campaign was instituted, with government spokesman Vo Nguyen Giap admitting publicly that abuses had taken place: peasants with modest holdings had been attacked, too many people had been executed, torture had been used extensively, etc.

The announcement of the campaign was, however, unable to halt the momentum of working class resistance to the reorganization

The only way the government could prevent further mass uprisings was to billet soldiers permanently in workers' homes and to exercise strict control over travelling blacksmiths.

being attempted by the Party and the state. As the rectification process was getting under way, a large revolt erupted in Nghe An province (which, embarrassingly enough for the government, was the birthplace of Ho--but it was also the site of the major 1930's uprising against the French). The rebellion involved 20,000 people, but it was quickly and brutally suppressed by the army, with an estimated 6,000 people killed or arrested. Yet, people who had fought for decades against the French and Japanese could not be defeated so easily.

Resistance continued, and the only way the government could prevent further mass uprisings was to billet soldiers permanently in workers' homes in the province and to exercise strict control over travelling blacksmiths to prevent them from aiding in the illicit production of weapons. The Party and the state admitted a certain measure of defeat on April 19, 1957, when the DRV press agency announced tersely that "for a definite time period, the Party shall, above all, increase its strength in the cities and industrial centers."¹⁸

Finally, when the DRV proceeded with its collectivization program in 1958, it was forced to scale down drastically its plans for full-fledged communes and accept instead many "semi-socialist" co-ops. Even by 1960, when 76 percent of the land and 85 percent of the farm units in the north were collectivized in some form, only 40,000 hectares were held by communes, while 700,000 hectares belonged to the co-ops.¹⁹ The resistance to the communes was not a matter of reactionary individualism standing in the way of progressive communalism. Rural workers knew that the introduction of communes would mean greater control over their working conditions by the Party and the state, as well as limitations on their standard of living for the sake of accumulation. Increases in agricultural productivity were the concern only of government planners seeking to promote industry; the concern of rural workers was to make themselves less vulnerable to socialist exploitation.

DEVELOPMENT AND STRUGGLE IN THE SOUTH

During this time, workers in the south of Vietnam were struggling against another form of development--that being imposed by the U.S. also at the point of a gun. In the course of the Diem regime in the 1950's--before the outbreak of full-scale war--the attempt to control the rural working class was carried out through a series of land reform schemes which were certainly different from those in the north, but whose ultimate aims were essentially the same: maintaining "order" in the countryside and obtaining maximum agricultural productivity in order to promote industry. A situation in which more than 50 percent of the land was owned by 2.5 percent of the landowners, along with high rents, high irrigation fees, uncertainty of tenure, and exorbitant interest rates, fueled persistent insurgency in the south following the supposedly temporary partition of the country in 1954. The first step taken to control this insurgency through land reform was the 1955 Ordinance Two, which established a rent ceiling of 25 percent of income and protected tenancy rights by guaranteeing three to five-year contracts. This was followed by Ordinance 57 in 1956, which limited basic landholdings to 100 hectares per family and proposed to sell the extra land "appropriated" (actually, purchased with cash and government bonds) from the large owners to the smaller ones. However, these first programs were almost completely unsuccessful, since they failed to gain the support of either the rich landlords or the poor peasants. The wealthy found ways to avoid being stripped of their land, so that of the 1.8 million hectares that should have been available for "redis-

tribution," only 248,000 hectares had changed hands by 1965.²⁰ The rural workers, meanwhile, turned to the insurgent forces (which in 1960 became the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam) and fought for free land, rent reductions, and higher wages for landless peasants.

Consequently, the next phases of land reform were more explicitly aimed at rural pacification. The Agrovillage Program initiated in 1959 sought to concentrate peasants in communities of several thousand, where they would be required to do large amounts of "community development volunteer labor" so that it would be more difficult for them to join the insurgent movement. That program was followed by the Strategic Hamlet scheme of 1962, the New Life Hamlet Program of 1964, and the Revolutionary Development Program of 1966--all of which involved increasingly repressive measures to control the rural population and reinforce the discipline of work. The culmination came in the decision by U.S. planners that if the peasants could not be controlled in the countryside, they should be forced into government-controlled cities by bombing them off the land. The hope was that this policy of forced urbanization (which was certainly the most sophisticated strategy of primitive accumulation ever) would create conditions such that, as Samuel Huntington put it, "History may pass the Vietcong by."²¹

We know what happened to this hope, but if history has passed the U.S. by in Vietnam, what is it that has been defeated? To speak of a victory over imperialist aggression is not enough; it is necessary to explain what were the intentions of that aggression. This is surely a complicated question, but in the end it comes down to a matter of making Vietnam safe for the accumulation of capital, that is, making development possible.

Such a perspective appeared most clearly in the plans drawn up by U.S. officials for what would be done in Vietnam after the war was won. The most prominent of these was that drafted by the Joint Development Group, which was established in Saigon in 1967 and was composed of David Lilienthal's Development and Resources Corporation and a group of prominent South Vietnamese professionals. Lilienthal expressed the orientation of the JDG when he wrote in 1969: "We perceive a clear though little recognized relationship between political accommodation and stability on the one hand, and economic stability on the other."²² (That relationship was indeed recognized at least by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who declared in a 1966 speech on Vietnam: "Security means development...without development there can be no security."²³)

The report of the JDG started out with what now appears as extraordinary optimism, concerning both the outcome of the war and the condition of the south in the postwar period. The infrastructure was expected to be in excellent condition and there would be a large pool of skilled labor--though there was concern about a massive postwar unemployment problem requiring the creation of 900,000 jobs in the first two years. The aim of putting the entire population to work under controllable conditions (which, after all, is what development is all about) was quite clear in the recommendation of labor-intensive public works projects--much like those carried out by the French: "It

is vastly preferable to employ people on productive works, of *however low a priority*, than to provide relief." 24

At the heart of the plan was the rapid development of industry, which was supposed to take place with a healthy level of foreign investment. This was seen as necessary, according to Lilienthal, to integrate Vietnam into the world economy and avoid "xenophobia." The main foreign power that was to be welcomed was Japan. Lilienthal ended his *Foreign Affairs* article on the JDG report with stress on the importance of Tokyo's role in the postwar period--a comment that was obviously appreciated in Japan itself, where a prominent economist wrote at the same time: "The greatest attraction in investing in Vietnam is without a doubt a sufficient supply of cheap labor...Particular consideration should be given (in the postwar period) to ensuring an adequate supply of high-quality



and inexpensive labor which does not quit easily." 25 Even before the actual end of the war, Japan established a foothold in the country, so that in 1973 large amounts of foreign aid were offered to the Thieu regime and plans were drawn up for a \$50 million agricultural project at Phan Rang, while *Business Week* reported: "Japanese companies have been among the first to tap cheap South Vietnamese labor, paying wages one-half the prevailing level in Singapore." 26 Yet, the Japanese were not short-sighted; they saw the inevitable future

course of Vietnam, and thus made overtures to Hanoi as well.

THE POSTWAR SITUATION

The activities of Japanese business in Vietnam have epitomized the remarkable degree of continuity that has appeared in the economic policy of the new regime established following the liberation of the south in the spring of 1975. The momentous achievement of full national liberation and the introduction of socialism in the south have, surprisingly enough, been followed by a sharp escalation of involvement with the capitalist countries--especially Japan, but also the U.S. itself. Only weeks after the liberation of Saigon, it was reported that "the South Vietnamese seem eager to resume trade (particularly exports) with former trading partners of the Thieu regime. Le Dung Dan, who has stayed on as director of Saigon's Export Development Centre, called a meeting of South Vietnamese and foreign traders late last month (May 1975) to discuss pending exports from South Vietnam, for which foreign banks have already opened letters of credit."²⁷ The same article reported that "in general, Japanese business leaders are encouraged by recent developments in South Vietnam." This was not surprising, since it was soon revealed that "a dozen or so Japanese projects, which could be worth several hundred million dollars, already are in the works as the cash-short Vietnamese proffer raw materials, particularly iron and coal, for industrial equipment."²⁸ At the same time, a group of Swedish companies began negotiations to build a \$200 million pulp and paper mill north of Hanoi and the new Vietnamese government started discussions with French firms concerning the purchase of large quantities of agricultural equipment and industrial machinery. And more recently, the government awarded a \$66 million contract to Danish and Japanese firms for the design and construction of a cement plant in the north.

Even more astounding was that steps toward U.S. investment and trade were initiated by the new regime only weeks after the last Marine helicopter took off from the besieged American embassy in Saigon. Louis Sabouille, vice president and Asia representative of the Bank of America, was invited to Hanoi for discussions in early July, making him the first Sabouille returned from his talks bursting with enthusiasm over Vietnam's new potential in the international capitalist system; he told a corporate gathering: "Vietnam could be so successful in this economic reconstruction that the impact that her neighbours, and you as businessmen, should be considering is not only military or political but economic. I think that, before too long, Vietnam could emerge as a serious competitor in the Asian export market."²⁹ This sentiment was echoed by Huynh Van Tam, leader of the liberation trade union movement in the south, who, boasting of all the industrial facilities left behind by the U.S., told Wilfred Burchett: "Once we get all the factories working full time Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) will be a very big industrial center, the biggest in Southeast Asia."³⁰ To achieve this economic miracle, the new regime has joined the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Asian Development Bank, and has expressed willingness to accept

the "help" of U.S. corporations. Tiziano Terzani, an Italian journalist who remained in Saigon for several months after the liberation, has reported: "One Vietnamese official surprised me by saying: 'On a base of mutual interest we are prepared to accept American private investments in the country.' Though Hanoi's authorities are reluctant to say so openly, the fact remains that what Vietnam has to offer Western capitalism is a hard-working force of cheap labor." 31

Terzani's remark could have been taken as an exaggeration in the first 12 months after the liberation, since Vietnamese officials insisted that these deals with capitalist countries and corporations were only aimed at obtaining necessary goods and raw materials. Yet the comment took on a greater poignancy in the fall of 1976, when a new policy began to emerge in Hanoi and Saigon. In September the

'Though Hanoi's authorities are reluctant to say so openly, the fact remains that what Vietnam has to offer Western capitalism is a hard-working force of cheap labor.'

government started work on a set of guidelines for foreign investment that included the repatriation of profits, at which time the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported that "a highly-placed Vietnamese official said, 'they (the foreign investors) can bring technology and raw materials, we can give labour.'" 32 Subsequent reports on the investment code indicated that the government will in some cases permit up to 100 percent foreign ownership, as well offering incentives such as the elimination of taxes and duties and a 10 to 15-year non-nationalization guarantee. At the same time, although the government has announced nothing about wage levels in these investment operations, "the cost of the plentiful labour in Vietnam is expected by businessmen to be competitive with Southeast Asian countries". 33 The general situation was summed up in the headline of an earlier article in *Forbes* magazine: "YANKEE, COME BACK! The Vietnamese Want U.S. Businessmen and U.S. Capital." 34

The question remains, however, whether the Party and the state will be able to mobilize labor in the way and to the extent necessary for their ambitious socialist development plans. A working class that spent 30 years engaged in guerrilla warfare, achieving an almost unbelievable victory over the greatest military force in the modern world, is not easily manipulated. A class that has been armed and that has organized itself so effectively for war will not return to work under the old conditions. This was seen immediately after the liberation, when the new government in the south guaranteed the property rights of the plantation and factory owners, and the workers responded by occupying facilities and making "unreasonable demands." Terzani reported that "at the end of June (1975) the planters in the Highlands began to leave their large rubber, coffee,

and tea plantations and moved to Saigon. The Front political cadres had told them to stay on the plantations and continue to cultivate them; but the workers accused them of being exploiters, demanded new indemnities, no longer obeyed orders, wanted to participate in the management, and refused to call them *patron*." 35

The greatest difficulty the regime is facing is that of moving labor from the cities to the countryside, for there has been considerable resistance in both places. Many people in Saigon are seeking to maintain a "marginal" existence--living by means of occasional jobs and hustles--rather than accept exhausting work in a factory or rice field. Although the government has not yet used outright coercion to transfer the one million people they hope to place in the "New Economic Zones" of the countryside, there have been reports that rice rations in parts of Saigon have been reduced 40 percent--presumably to add some extra "encouragement" to relocate. 36 Nevertheless, the power of the working class in Vietnam makes unlikely the



sort of massive forced deurbanization and rural mobilization of labor that was carried out in Cambodia. Even without such an attempt by the government, unrest among agricultural workers has been growing, with peasants reportedly showing "reluctance to work hard at double cropping when they are asked to sell rice to the Government at a low price." 37

In general, the crisis for the Party and the state is that the accumulated power of the class is standing in the way of the maximum labor productivity that is essential for rapid industrialization and development. This has been an especially acute problem in the north, where workers are no longer willing to accept austerity. Such discontent was apparently growing long before the end of the war. Nguyen Van Phung, a member of the Haiphong city committee, revealed in a 1971 article that during the mid-1960's in the factories of the city there was a situation of: "free work stoppages, of coming to work late and going home early, of disorderly and negligent performances, of profitlessly prolonged meetings, of rules and regulations of production not being respected, and of internal discipline rules

being violated...In addition, a number of social evils developed, such as dishonest trading, smuggling, the stealing of state property, lives of immoral obsessions, the loss of hygiene, odd and ridiculous hair styles and styles of dress, marauding and pestering, the singing of yellow songs, and the reading of indecent books...The foundations of labor and of work and of life before the war came close to being turned upside down." 38 Containing this sort of social rebellion became much more difficult for the government once the fighting in the south ended: a diplomat in Hanoi told Terzani in 1975 that "people here are now asking for more comfort, more goods. They see no reason why they should continue to make sacrifices." 39 This perception was echoed by the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, which reported in 1976 that productivity in the north has been chronically low and that "the labor force (is) fed up with an austerity that seems no nearer relaxation although the war against Washington and Saigon (is) over." 40 A more explicit indication of unrest in the north has been given by Canadian journalist Colin Hoath, who visited there in August 1976. He found that "some of the wealthiest men in Vietnam today are coal miners digging open-cast coal for export to Japan. But those who have money find few things available to buy." Hoath went on to report that officials confirmed that a group of miners "attempted to slow productivity" in 1975 and forced the government to make more merchandise available. 41 Finally, perhaps the most significant general comment on the tension in the north came in a report by Vice Premier Le Thanh Nghi: "Although production has gradually become stable, we have not yet been able to create an atmosphere of truly great enthusiasm for labour as required by the Party and the State." 42

In an attempt to rekindle this enthusiasm, the government has made a few efforts at promoting moral incentives. In a speech in the fall of 1975, North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong declared: "We call on the working class and other working people in the towns and countryside to bring into play their role as masters under the new regime by working harder than before, with higher productivity, technique, and discipline." 43 The problem is that the working class appears to see its new role as one of working *less* than before, with less discipline. As a result, the regime seems to be assessing carefully its degree of control in manipulating labor-power, in order to plan stronger measures. It appears that an experiment in this area has involved sending thousands of workers to work in Czechoslovakian factories, presumably to give the government some clues as to how easy it will be to move labor about and how Vietnamese workers will react to sophisticated production technologies. 44

At the same time, there have been signs that the government suspects it may not be able to control the working class at all as it desires, and is thus considering the possibility of a much more capital-intensive development strategy. An indication of this is the great stress being placed on the development of petroleum resources. Various international oil companies, which had been granted leases by the Thieu regime to search offshore in the South China Sea, found some oil (in the White Tiger strike of 1974) after \$100 million had been spent in exploration; but the firms fled during the last phase of

the military offensive in the south. Yet, soon after the liberation, there were reports that the new government was in contact with Mobil and Shell in order to draw up new agreements. Subsequent reports have indicated that Vietnamese officials have been planning the establishment of a state oil company and have been negotiating with petroleum executives from Japan, France, Italy, Iran, Venezuela, Mexico, Algeria, and the U.S.⁴⁵ The new regime is apparently going to great lengths to protect itself from further excessive demands of the working class, especially the powerful coal miners.

THE CRISIS OF SOCIALISM

This is the situation at present in Vietnam: the Party and the state promoting work and development, and the workers expressing an unwillingness to accept toil and austerity any longer. The crisis of socialism in Vietnam, as well as in the rest of the so-called Third World, arises from this contradiction between the power of the working class to force wage increases and a large reduction in the intensity of exploitation, and the productivity requirements of the socialist development process. The new regime in Vietnam faces the dilemma that the many years of armed struggle against France, Japan, and the U.S. not only organized the class in a way that might permit vast increases in production, but one that has also allowed workers to build an enormous amount of *autonomous power*. It is this power that is threatening to upset the delicate balance on which "Third World socialism" is based.

Although it is too early to determine the outcome of this impasse, there are indications that the power of the working class is forcing the government in Vietnam to alter its strategy. The new Five-Year Plan (1976-1980) presented to the Vietnam Workers Party congress in December 1976 embodied a marked shift from the development

The Party and the state are promoting work and development, while the workers are expressing an unwillingness to accept toil and austerity any longer.

policy that had been promoted by officials in the north for many years. The plan toned down the emphasis on heavy industry (which previously was gospel) and called for greater concentration on agriculture and light industry, in other words, the production of more food and consumer goods. Le Duan went so far as to promise that every Vietnamese household would be provided with such "luxuries" as electric appliances.⁴⁶ This shift seemed to be motivated not so much by a new theory of development or even populist sentiments as by the need to respond to growing popular pressure for improvements in the standard of living. The *Far Eastern Economic Review*

noted that on the part of the government "there is an apparent realisation that the war-weary population of the north, which has undergone privation for over two decades, cannot immediately be asked to make more sacrifices for socialist accumulation of capital. And the southern population, used to foreign-funded consumerism, similarly cannot easily be returned to subsistence level without serious problems."⁴⁷ To some extent, the retreat from rapid industrialization may be the result of insufficient foreign aid, especially from the "fraternal socialist countries" (though Vietnam has already received \$35 million from the I.M.F.); but undoubtedly the main problem for Le Duan and company is that the workers of Vietnam have a very different notion of what socialism should be all about.

In all post-revolutionary situations in recent history, the socialist regimes have been forced to make significant improvements in wage levels, working conditions, social services, etc. in order to secure the cooperation of the working class in development. This has amounted to a productivity deal analogous to the Keynesian arrangements in the "advanced" capitalist countries in the postwar period. But just as Keynesianism has been torn apart by the cycle of working class struggle over the past 20 years (see *ZEROWORK* 1), so is a new form of struggle undermining the socialist alternative. Socialism is thus experiencing the same fate as the trade unions in the "developed" world of the West. Both are initially expressions of the power and the victories of the working class, yet both become bypassed because of their integration into the global capitalist system and because of new forms of working class struggle. This integration has reached a point such that the notions of opposing blocs or "worlds" (First, Second, Third) no longer give adequate expression to the international dynamics of class struggle. In addition, this means that the propulsion of a socialist country like Vietnam into the global system--as is seen so vividly in the postwar policies of the new regime--undermines all the arguments for the necessity of austerity and the acceptance of socialist development. The problem for the working class of Vietnam has gone beyond that of building socialism and is now one of engaging in the international struggle over work and income. This change in the direction of struggle, resulting from the new form of class power, strips socialism of its revolutionary content and makes it just one more form of the imposition of work to be fought against.

February 1977

NOTES

1. Pallu de la Barriere, *Histoire de l'Expedition de Cochinchine en 1861*, Paris, 1864, pp. 230-1; quoted in Christine Pelzer White, "The Vietnamese

Revolutionary Alliance," in John W. Lewis, ed., **Peasant Rebellion and Communist Revolution in Asia**, Stanford University Press, 1974, p. 91.

2. Ngo Vinh Long, **Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants Under the French**, M.I.T. Press, 1973, p.21.

3. Eric R. Wolf, **Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century**, Harper and Row, 1969, p.165.

4. Joseph Bugginger, **Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled**, Praeger, 1967, vol. I, p. 166.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

6. Virginia Thompson, **French Indo-China**, Macmillan, 1937, reprinted by Octagon, 1968, p. 150.

7. International Labour Office, "Labour Conditions in Indo-China," Studies & Reports Series B, No. 26, Geneva, 1938, p. 75.

8. Charles Robequain, **The Economic Development of French Indo-China**, Oxford University Press, 1941, p. 82.

9. Buttinger, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

10. International Labour Office, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

11. Guy Gran, "Vietnam and the Capitalist Route to Modernity," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1975.), p.226; cited by James C. Scott, **The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia**, Yale University Press, 1976, p.83.

12. Le Parti Communiste Indochinois, **Documents**, vol. 4, Hanoi, 1924, p.32; quoted in Scott, *op. cit.*, p.124.

13. Scott, *op. cit.*, p.2.

14. LeDuan, **The Vietnamese Revolution: Fundamental Problems and Essential Tasks**, International Publishers, 1971, pp. 77, 65.

15. Hoang Van Chi, **From Colonialism to Communism: A Case History of North Vietnam**, Praeger, 1964, p. 82.

16. Bernard B. Fall, **The Two Viet-Nams**, Praeger, 1967, p. 156.

17. Hoang Van Chi, *op. cit.*, p. 212 (emphasis added).

18. Fall, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

19. Le Chau, **Le Viet Nam socialiste: une Economie de transition**, Maspero, 1966, pp. 184-186; cited in Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

20. Robert Sansom, **The Economics of Insurgency in the Mekong Delta**, M.I.T. Press, 1970, p. 57.

21. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Basis of Accommodation in Vietnam," **Foreign Affairs**, July 1968.

22. David E. Lillenthal, "Postwar Development in Vietnam," **Foreign Affairs**, January 1969.

24. Republic of Viet-Nam (U.S. Embassy), "Postwar Development of Viet-Nam: A Summary Report," Viet-Nam Documents Series V, March 1969, p. 19.

25. Masataka Ohta, quoted in Banning Garrett, "Postwar Planning for South Vietnam," in **The Trojan Horse**, revised 1975 edition, Ramparts Press, pp. 141-142.

26. **Business Week**, 27 January 1973.

27. **Far Eastern Economic Review**, 27 June 1975.

28. **Business Week**, 15 September 1975.
29. **Far Eastern Economic Review**, 13 February 1976.
30. **The Guardian** (New York), 8 October 1975.
31. Tiziano Terzani, "Vietnam: The First Year," **New York Review of Books**, 15 July 1976.
32. **Far Eastern Economic Review**, 24 September 1976.
33. **Ibid.**, 31 December 1976.
34. **Forbes**, 15 January 1976.
35. Tiziano Terzani, **Giai Phong! The Fall and Liberation of Saigon**, St. Martin's, 1976, p. 280. For more on the transformation of production in the south immediately after the end of the war, see Wilfred Burchett, **Grasshoppers and Elephants**, Urizen Books, 1977, part 3, chapter 16.
36. **Far Eastern Economic Review**, 11 June 1976.
41. Dispatch from Hanoi by Colin Hoath, correspondent for the Canadian Broadcast Corporation, transmitted by the Associated Press, 1 September 1976.
42. Le Thanh Nghi, Report to the 2nd Session of the 5th National Assembly of the DRV, December 1975, quoted in **Vietnam Courier** (Hanoi), February 1976. For more on the productivity problem in the north, see the Economist Intelligence Unit, **Quarterly Economic Review for Indochina**, No. 2-1976, p. 8.
43. Pham Van Dong, Speech on the 30th Anniversary of the DRV, 2 September 1975, reprinted in **Vietnam Quarterly**, no. 1 January 1976, p. 61.
44. **New York Times**, 25 April 1976; **Manchester Guardian/Le Monde Weekly**, 6 June 1976.
45. **Far Eastern Economic Review** 20 February 1976; **New York Times** 27 January 1977.
46. See **New York Times**, 15 December 1976; **Economist** 25 December 1976; and **Far Eastern Economic Review**, 17 December 1976.
47. **Far Eastern Economic Review**, 4 February 1977.



Cambodia's emblem: Emphasis on work.