

# A. Labour Problems and the Five-Year Plans

## Activity 1

- Use the information in Sources 1 and 2 and a graph-drawing program to produce bar graphs illustrating the following:
  - Net gains or losses in the Magnitogorsk labour force for each month in 1931
  - The overall pattern of gains and losses between 1930 and 1933.
- Using ICT, produce a bar graph which shows:
  - Total number of workers on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1931
  - Total arrivals for 1931
  - Total departures for 1931
  - Total number of workers on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1931.
- What do these graphs reveal about the turnover of labour in Magnitogorsk in 1931?

1 <sup>st</sup> of month	Total workers	Arrived during the month	Left during the month
January	18,865	3,597	3,853
February	18,609	4,398	3,402
March	19,605	8,570	5,934
April	22,241	9,391	7,166
May	24,446	17,640	9,826
June	32,280	17,292	10,825
July	38,747	10,983	12,694
August	37,006	8,693	11,447
September	34,252	10,381	9,421
October	35,162	8,003	10,072
November	33,093	10,350	10,797
December	32,666	7,440	7,835

← SOURCE 1 – Labour turnover at Magnitogorsk, 1931

	Arrived	Left
1930	67,000	45,000
1931	111,000	97,000
1932	62,000	70,000
1933	53,000	53,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>293,000</b>	<b>265,000</b>

↑ SOURCE 2 – Workers arriving at and departing from Magnitogorsk, 1930-33

## Activity 2

You are advisers to the Politburo. Working in groups of three, suggest at least one solution for each of the problems identified below. Then compare your solutions with those of other groups. Are you going to:

- Use methods of intimidation to force the most out of the workers?
- Find ways to encourage them to perform more satisfactorily?

### Problems

- Continuing shortage of labour - where can you get more workers for the factories?
- Skills shortage - what can you do about the lack of technical skills?]
- Poor work habits amongst the ex-peasants - poor discipline and clumsiness.
- Keeping the workforce stable - it is very hard to establish good practices if your workforce is constantly changing and moving to other places.
- Absenteeism.
- Motivating the workers to increase their productivity.
- Keep the existing skilled working class happy.

## **B. How did the party respond to its labour problems?**

### **Wage differentials and incentives**

To stop workers 'flitting from job to job, wage differentials (i.e. paying some people more than others) were introduced to reward those who stayed put and acquired skills. Managers were allowed to pay bonuses. Other incentives were also used, such as awarding honours to outstanding workers; these were not just moral rewards but could bring perks and privileges such as access to closed shops, better housing and better clothes. Egalitarianism in wages was abandoned as early as 1931.

### **Piece Work**

Payment according to the pieces of work completed became common across industry, to try to drive up productivity.

### **Training**

A massive training programme was brought into being. But many of the training programmes were poor and trainees were rushed through by poor instructors. The situation improved in the Second Five-Year Plan with fewer but better training schemes made available.

### **Tough Measures**

A series of measures were brought in between 1930 and 1933 to deal with absentees. These included dismissal, eviction from factory-owned homes or loss of various benefits. Causing damage or leaving a job without permission could lead to a prison sentence. The intimidation and terror applied to the bourgeois specialists were also applied to the workers. The degree of control increased during the Second and Third Five-Year Plans. In 1938, labour books were issued, along with internal passports. The labour book gave details of a worker's labour history, qualifications and any misdemeanours. It was very difficult to survive without one of these. In 1940, absenteeism became a crime, with two offences bringing a prison sentence.

### **Forced labour**

Some labour shortages were solved by using forced labour, especially for the worst jobs in the worst conditions. Around 300,000 prisoners worked on the Baltic-White Sea Canal, many of them kulaks arrested during the collectivisation drive. After April 1930 all criminals sentenced to more than three years were sent to labour camps to provide cheap labour. The government decreed that these camps should be self-supporting. Lumber camps were set up in the forests of the frozen north and the timber produced was exported to help earn money for industrial investment. The number of forced labourers increased when the Great Purges got into full swing in the mid-1930s.

### **Propaganda and Encouragement**

A huge propaganda campaign was mounted to encourage workers to raise their productivity, which was outstandingly low during the First Five-Year Plan. Shock-brigade campaigns (mounting intensive efforts to build structures such as dams) and 'socialist competition' were tried to raise work norms but they enjoyed only limited success. Probably the most significant propaganda initiative was the Stakhanovite movement. Although this caused some problems in the economy, productivity rates did improve.

### **Activity 3**

1. Draw a diagram to record the main ways in which the government tried to deal with the problems it faced.
2. Compare these with the solutions you suggested in Activity 2.
3. What surprises you about some of the methods adopted by the Communists?

## C. Labour Problems – Source Analysis

### Activity 4

Use the information in Sources 3-7 to answer the following questions:

1. Which of the measures the Soviet government brought in do not fit well with socialism and would be more at home in a capitalist system?
2. What does Moshe Lewin (Source 4) reveal about the problems facing the Soviet authorities and the actions they took?
3. How reliable do you think Moshe Lewin's account is as a historical source?
4. What do Sources 3-6 tell you about the methods used to motivate workers?
5. Does John Scott's account (Source 6) suggest these were successful?
6. How reliable do you think his account is?
7. Do you think the 'Dear Marfa' letter (Source 7) is solely the work of the author?
  - a) Why did she write this letter or allow her name to be attached to it?
  - b) What arguments does Anna use to persuade Marfa to reform her husband?
  - c) Marfa was illiterate but the letter could have been read to her. How effective do you think it was?

**SOURCE 3** – S. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation*, 1995, pp. 90-92

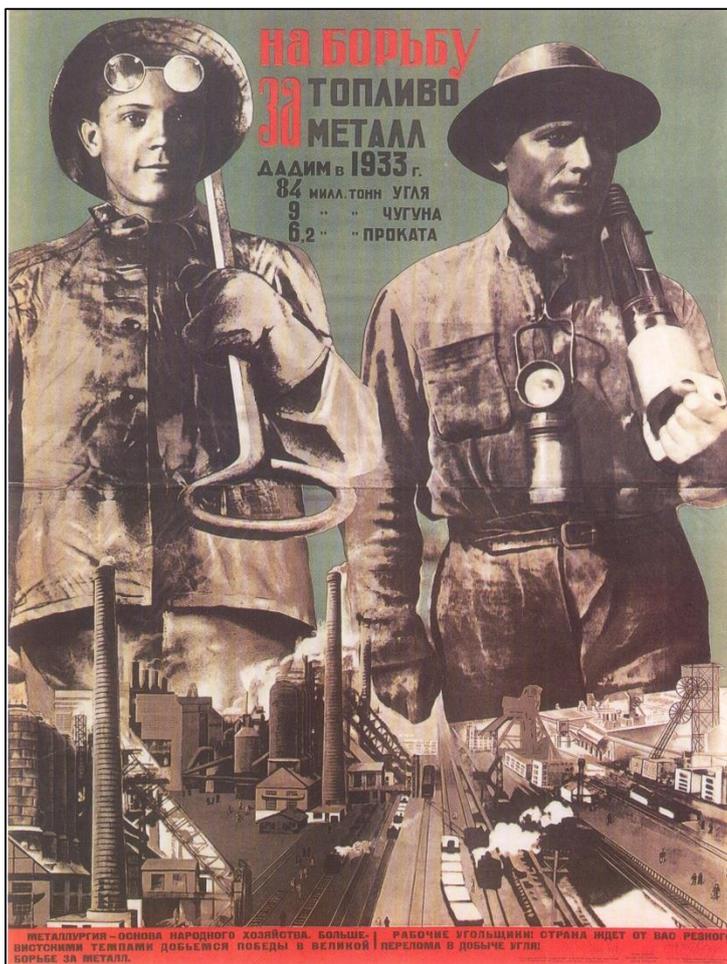
*In 1930 work began on a dam on the Ural River to supply the steel factory with water. Shock work began: 'Everyone to the dam! Everything for the dam!' There was socialist competition between left and right banks. The target date moved forward but the dam was built in a record 74 days, well ahead of schedule. One contemporary writer wrote: 'The Magnitogorsk dam was the school at which people began to respect Bolshevik miracles.' But it was not deep enough and the water froze, there was a chronic shortage of water, and a new dam five times as big was started almost immediately. When it was completed the first dam was submerged.*

**SOURCE 4** – M. Lewin, 'Society, State and Ideology during the First Five-Year Plan', 1976, in C. Ward (ed.), *The Stalinist Dictatorship*, 1998, pp. 178-79. Lewin has an interesting background. Born in Poland in 1921, he became active in left-wing politics, escaping from the Nazis to work in the Soviet Union on a kolkhoz and in a mill. He was an officer in the Red Army for a brief time. After the Second World War he spent ten years in a kibbutz in Israel before holding academic positions in France, Britain and the USA.

*One of the results of this [mass influx of peasants to the cities] was the breakdown of labour discipline, which saddles the state with an enormous problem of education and disciplining the mass of the crude labour force. The battle against absenteeism, shirking, drinking in factories during working hours, and breaking tools was long, and the Soviet government played no 'humanistic' games in this fight. Very soon, methods such as denial of ration cards, eviction from lodgings, and even penal sentences for undisciplined workers were introduced.*

*Factories and mines in these years were transformed into railway stations – or as Ordzhonikidze exclaimed in despair – into one huge 'nomadic gypsy camp'. The cost of the turnover was incredible. Before they had managed to learn their job, people had already given their notice or done something in order to get fired. But the same process, and on a larger scale, was going on among managers and administrators, specialists and officials. At all levels of the local administration and party apparatus, people adopted the habit of leaving in good time, before they were penalized, recalled, brought in for questioning, downgraded, fired or arrested.*

*Thus workers, administrators, specialists, officials, party apparatus men, and, in great masses, peasants were all moving around and changing jobs, creating unwanted surpluses in some places and dearths in others, losing skills or failing to acquire them, creating streams and floods in which families were destroyed, children lost, and morality dissolved. Social, administrative, industrial and political structures were all in flux. The mighty dictatorial government found itself, as a result of its impetuous activity during those early years of accelerated industrialisation, presiding over a 'quicksand' society.*



↑ **SOURCE 5** – A Soviet propaganda poster, *In the Struggle for Fuel and Metal*, produced in 1933 with the aim of spurring on the workers to fulfil the Five-Year Plan. Gustav Klutsis, the creator of this poster, was a master of photo-montage techniques, and his posters were reproduced thousands of times. A party member since 1920, he was a loyal Stalinist, but neither this nor his work for the party could save him when he was denounced by a jealous rival during the purges; he was shot in 1938.

**SOURCE 6** – J. Scott, *Behind the Urals*, 1942, p. 49. Scott describes aspects of the attempts to motivate workers in Magnitogorsk

*In 1933 wage differentials were approximately as follows: the average monthly wage for an unskilled worker in Magnitogorsk was something in the neighbourhood of 100 roubles; a skilled workers' apprentice 200, a skilled worker, 300; an engineer with experience 600 to 800; administrators, directors etc., anywhere from 800 to 3000. The heavy differentiation plus the absence of unemployment and the consequent assurance of being able without difficulty to get any job in any profession learned, supplemented and stimulated the intellectual curiosity of the people. The two together were so potent that they created a student body in the Magnitogorsk night schools of 1933 willing to work eight, ten or even twelve hours on the job under the severest conditions, and then come back to night school, sometimes on an empty stomach and, sitting on a backless wooden bench, in a room so cold that you could see your breath a yard in front of you, study mathematics four hours straight...*

*...Competition between individuals, brigades and whole departments was encouraged... The Stakhanov movement hit Magnitogorsk in the autumn of 1935. Brigade and shop competition was intensified. Banners were awarded to the brigades who worked best, and monetary remuneration accompanied banners... Wages rose. Production rose...*

**SOURCE 7** – Extracts from a letter preserved in the Magnitogorsk archives, from Anna Kovaleva to Marfa Gidzia, and quoted in S. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation*, 1995, pp. 218-19

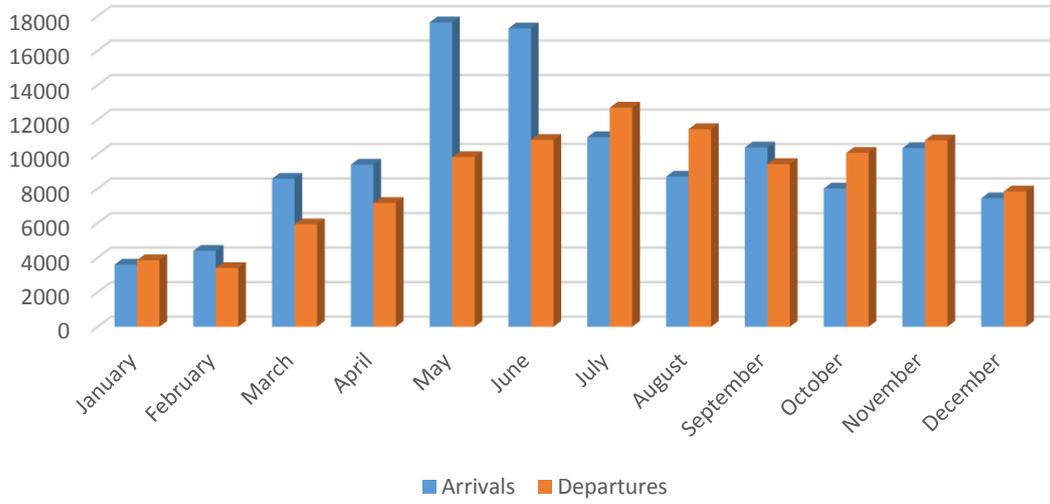
*Dear Marfa!*

*We are both wives of locomotive drivers of the rail transport of Magnitka. You probably know that the rail transport workers of the MMK (Magnitogorsk Metallurgical Complex) are not fulfilling the plan, that they are disrupting the supply of the blast furnaces, open hearths and rolling shops... All the workers of Magnita accuse our husbands... Every day there are stoppages and breakdowns in rail transport... [To fulfil the plan] it is necessary to work like the best workers of our country work. Among such workers is my husband, Aleksandr Panteleevich Kovalev. He always works like a shock worker, exceeding his norms, while economising on oil and lubricants... My husband receives prizes every month... My husband's locomotive is always clean and well taken care of... Your husband, Iakov Stepanovich, does not fulfil the plan. He has frequent breakdowns on his locomotive, his locomotive is dirty, and he always overconsumes fuel... all the rail workers of Magnita know him, for the wrong reasons, as the worst driver. By contrast,, my husband is known as a shock worker. He is written up and praised in the newspapers... He and I are honoured everywhere as shock workers. At the store we get everything without having to wait in queues. We moved to the building for shock workers. We get an apartment with rugs, a gramophone, a radio and other comforts...*

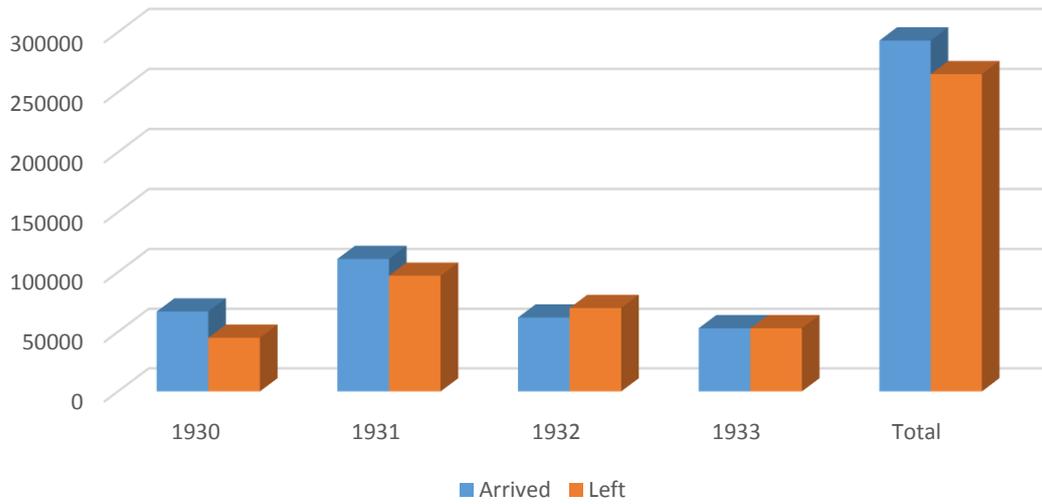
*Therefore, I ask you, Marfa, to talk to your husband... Persuade him that he must work honourably, conscientiously, like a shock worker. Teach him to understand the words of comrade Stalin, that work is a matter of honour, glory, valour and heroism...*

# Answers

## Net Gains and Losses in Magnitogorsk Labour Force for 1931



## Overall Gains and Losses in Magnitogorsk Labour Force 1930-1933



3. Graphs all show that despite high migration of workers to Magnitogorsk, depatures remained high meaning that turnover was high.

