

The Forces of Labour in China: Constraining Capital?

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New Perspectives on Labour Disputes in Globalise China

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'Chinese workers rise up'?

- Western media and trade union interest in Honda strikes
- Place the events of spring/summer 2010 in a framework of China's industrial relations development during the reform era.
- Identify the opportunities for, and constraints on, Chinese workers exercising influence in the workplace
- Is a labour movement emerging?

Core Argument

- The Honda strikes represent a significant development for the Chinese working class
- The strikes were not 'out of the blue' but part of an emerging pattern of unrest.
- A gradual increase in workers' capacity to challenge employer hegemony in the workplace.
- The development of a labour movement remains constrained by the absence of freedom of association and collective bargaining.

Reconstructing labour-capital relations in the reform era

- State's direct influence over terms and conditions of work reduced - cautiously
- From permanent employment to contracted labour – smashing the iron rice bowl.
- Legislating industrial relations in the era of globalisation
- Building a labour dispute resolution system

Trade unions

- All China Federation of Trade Unions
 - Politically strong but organisationally weak
- Establishing (组建) not organising (组织)
- Representing the interests of the whole people
- Collective contracts Consultation (协商) versus Bargaining (谈判)
- Trade union pilots

Resistance to restructuring in the state sector

- Widespread but scattered resistance
- Xiagang – removal from the points of power
- Lack of leadership
- State response to unrest
- Absence of alternatives
- Spring 2002

Resisting capital in the private sector

- From defensive protests to strikes
- From victim to worker/citizen
- 2004: serious labour shortages
- Challenging the low pay labour regime: ‘collective bargaining by riot’
- State response: from repression to concession
- 2008/9 Global financial crisis.

On the eve of Honda

- Economic recovery; labour shortages and re-emergence of strikes
- Shift in focus of economic growth
- Continued absence of FOA and the right to strike
- Weakening of restrictions on residence (户口制度)
- Accumulation of experience in the factory system and core of skilled and experienced migrant workers
- Improved legal and regulatory environment

The Honda car parts factory strike

- Older core workers with experience of disputes
- Young educated vocational school students on working experience
- Wage freeze and overtime ban
- Weak workplace representation
- Union dues
- Regional and international support: role of LNGOs and labour academics
- Key demands: 800 yuan wage rise and re-organisation of the trade union

Significance of the victory

- Negotiated settlement not imposed from above
- Pressure on employers replicated in other parts of the country via strike wave
- More pressure on ACFTU to better represent its members' interests
- Role of the media, communications and internet technology
- Emergence of tangible solidarity
- Election of union officers in re-organisation of factory trade union committee.

Confronting capital in the workplace

- Realisation among sections of CPC leadership that the 'harmonious society' requires active workplace representation.
- Increasing awareness among employers that the labour market will remain tight
- Narrowing of gap between traditional urban working class and migrant workers
- Skilled workers and line supervisors: stopping production.
- Shift towards collective bargaining among labour activists.

An emerging labour movement?

- 'Normalisation' of strikes
- Disputes are no longer confined to a specific enterprise.
- Pressure on ACFTU growing but balanced by CPC anxiety
- Primary level unions remain dependent on employers and collective bargaining in its infancy
- Prohibition of freedom of association
- Nascent forms of unfettered association are more common