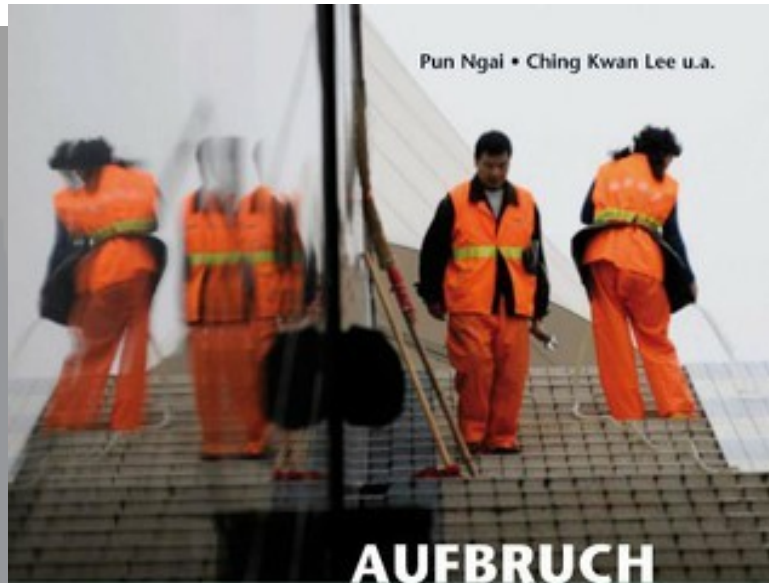


Daniel Fuchs, Frido Wenten

Changing Class Relations in China: Prospects for Workers' Autonomous Agency



**AUFBRUCH
DER ZWEITEN
GENERATION**

Wanderarbeit, Gender und
Klassenzusammensetzung
in China

第二代

Assoziation A



闹

Unruhen in China

Beilage der Wildcat #80 – Dezember 2007

工潮 gongchao.org

Theoretical Premises

Political Marxism:

“The productive base itself exists in the shape of social, juridical and political forms – in particular forms of property and domination.” (Ellen Wood)

Robert Brenner: 1. social property relations → 2. strategies for (social/material) reproduction → 3. developmental patterns

Critical moment of turn towards capitalist socio-economic dynamics: reproduction of direct producers taking place fully in the market

Autonomist Marxism:

“Class composition” – 1. technical: the organisation of work in the production process; 2. political: the experiences and agency of the working class.

Capitalist development linked to a constant de- and re-composition of working class

Argument and structure...



1. 1978-1992 – „Experimentalism“
2. 1992-2002 – „Market liberalisation“
3. 2002-present – „Socialdemocratic consolidation/Crisis“

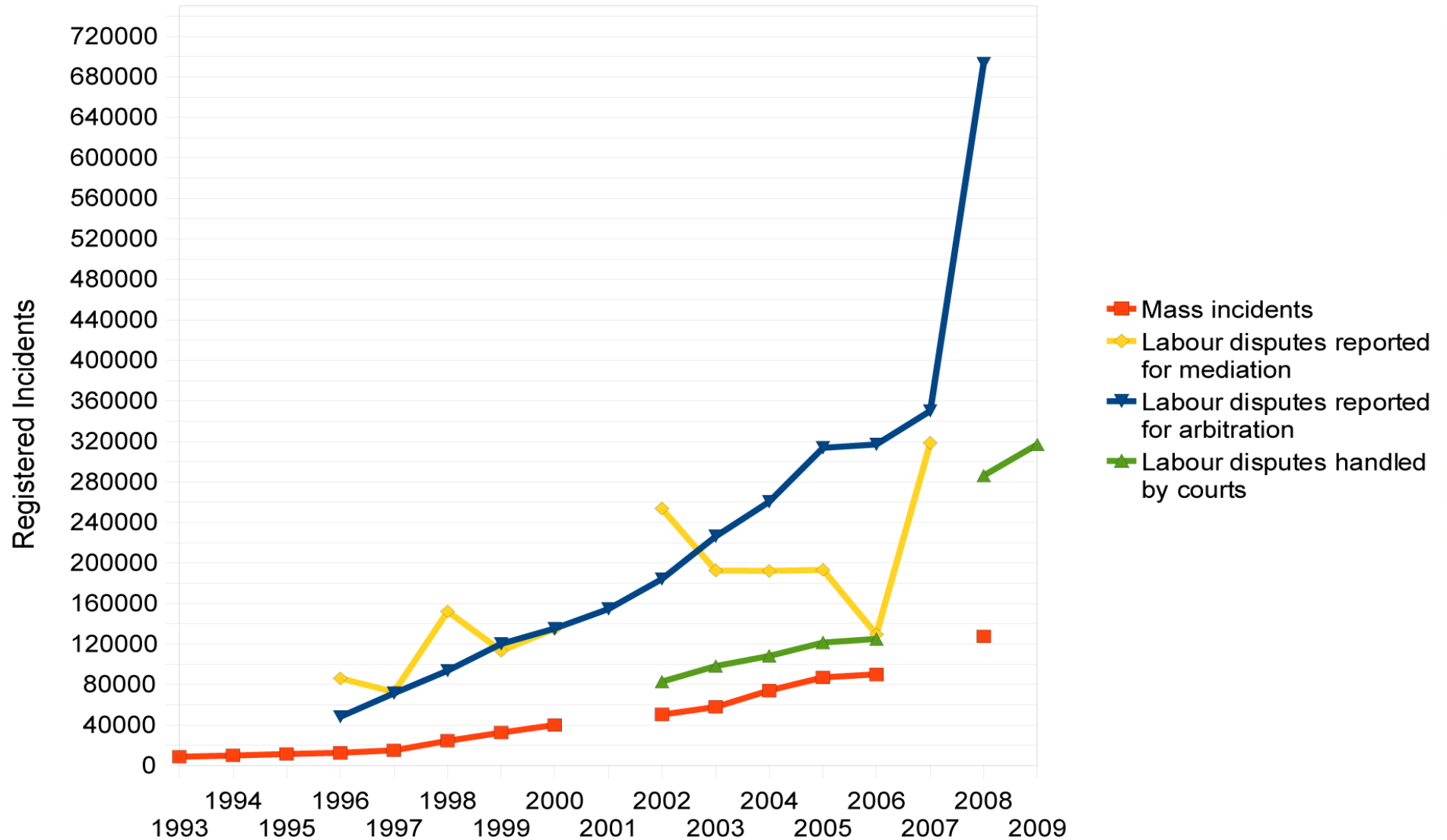
The recomposition of China's urban and rural working classes constitutes the social foundation of 1. a change in economic rationality and 2. China's specific form of export-led development.

Three periods can be identified, marked not only by changes in government leadership but by major changes in working class-composition at their beginning, and intensified labour unrest towards their end.

1978-1992			1992-2002			2002-present		
Socio-economic Change	Changes in Class Composition	Workers' agency	Socio-economic Change	Changes in Class Composition	Workers' agency	Socio-economic Change	Changes in Class Composition	Workers' agency
1979-82: dissolution of people's communes – return to small-holdings	Semi-proletarianisation of the peasantry	Welcoming land-reform; acts of self-driven redistribution of land	1992ff. “Socialist market economy” - build up of labour-intensive light industry	Labour migration to SEZ intensifies – first generation of migrant workers	Short-term migration; expectations linked to countryside			
1979ff. Special Economic Zones, joint-ventures	Emergence of wage labour and capitalist class antagonisms	Taking up opportunity of higher earnings	1994ff: “rule by law“ replaces planning; state-led redistribution → marketised insurances	Social reproduction of urban workers increasingly dependent on market relations	Ambivalent: private cum public employment welcomed; harsher discipline criticised			
Early, mid-1980s: Labour contracts, internal reform of State-Owned Enterprises	Emergence of wage labour; increasing discipline and pressure on urban working class	Welcoming higher wages in private sector as long as security of SOE-employment maintained	1996ff: SOE-privatisation: layoffs; implementation of wage labour / labour markets	Emergence of urban industrial reserve army	Discontent with reform growing; open protest; strong self-perception as “class”			
Late 1980s: Inflation; corruption	Worsening class antagonisms	Growing discontent	2001: WTO accession; privatisation almost complete	Conditions in private and public sector begin to converge	Struggles of urban workers continue until early 2000s			
→ Tiananmen 1989; main subject: intellectuals/petty bourgeoisie, urban working class			→ defensive, anti-commodification protests; main subject: urban working class					

Official data on labour struggles

Labour Disputes in China 1993-2009



1978-1992			1992-2002			2002-present		
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1979-82: dissolution of people's communes – return to small-holdings	Semi-proletarianisation of the peasantry	Welcoming land-reform; acts of self-driven redistribution of land	1992ff. “Socialist market economy” - build up of labour-intensive light industry	Labour migration to SEZ intensifies – first generation of migrant workers	Short-term migration; expectations linked to countryside	2002ff.: labour intensive, light industrial exports remain crucial and expand	Rural-urban migration continues – second generation of migrant workers	Expectations linked to permanent life in urban areas
1979ff. Special Economic Zones, joint-ventures	Emergence of wage labour and capitalist class antagonisms	Taking up opportunity of higher earnings	1994ff: “rule by law“ replaces planning; state-led redistribution → marketised insurances	Social reproduction of urban workers increasingly dependent on market relations	Ambivalent: private cum public employment welcomed; harsher discipline criticised	2003ff: “harmonious society”; extension of welfare services, trade union reforms: new corporatism	Migrants become majority of workforce in secondary and tertiary sector	Increasing spontaneous strike-activity amongst migrant workers
Early, mid-1980s: Labour contracts, internal reform of State-Owned Enterprises	Emergence of wage labour; increasing discipline and pressure on urban working class	Welcoming higher wages in private sector as long as security of SOE-employment maintained	1996ff: SOE-privatisation: layoffs; implementation of wage labour / labour markets	Emergence of urban industrial reserve army	Discontent with reform growing; open protest; strong self-perception as “class”	2006ff: plans to stimulate domestic consumption; labour friendly, but corporatist laws	Legal / contractual plant level standards for urban and migrant workers converge	Migrant workers' protest demands begin to transcend legal boundaries
Late 1980s: Inflation; corruption	Worsening class antagonisms	Growing discontent	2001: WTO accession; privatisation almost complete	Conditions in private and public sector begin to converge	Struggles of urban workers continue until early 2000s	2008: Crisis – slump in exports	Mass-layoffs	Return to countryside; job hopping; protest
→ Tiananmen 1989; main subject: intellectuals/petty bourgeoisie, urban working class			→ defensive, anti-commodification protests; main subject: urban working class			→ pro-active anti-exploitation struggles; main subject: second generation of migrant workers		

Interim conclusion

Class struggle „from above“ and „from below“ → changing conditions for material reproduction and composition of the working class → new economic rationality/imperatives

„From above“: Dismantling of non-marketised production and redistribution → commodification of urban labour – semi-proletarianisation of peasantry

„From below“:

Workers' agency 1: labour migration – subjectively driven supply of labour power (not response to material necessity)

Workers' agency 2: resistance to exploitation – concessions by capital/government as reaction to social destabilisation

→ condition of and limit to capitalist development

