

WORKERS'

INQUIRY

AND *Strategies,
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Workers' Inquiry and Global Class Struggle

Wildcat: Workers' Movements and Global Capitalism

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Workers' movements are a common and recurring feature in contemporary capitalism. The same militancy that inspired the mass labour movements of the twentieth century continues to define worker struggles that proliferate throughout the world today.

For more than a century, labour unions have mobilised to represent the political-economic interests of workers by uncovering the abuses of capitalism, establishing wage standards, improving oppressive working conditions, and bargaining with employers and the state. Since the 1970s, organised labour has declined in size and influence as the global power and influence of capital has expanded dramatically. The world over, existing unions are in a condition of fracture and turbulence in response to neoliberalism, financialisation, and the reappearance of rapacious forms of imperialism. New and modernised unions are adapting to conditions and creating class-conscious workers' movement rooted in militancy and solidarity. Ironically, while the power of organised labour contracts, working-class militancy and resistance persists and is growing in the Global South.

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Workers' Inquiry and Global Class Struggle

Strategies, Tactics, Objectives

Edited by Robert Ovetz

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Worker Organizing in China: Challenges and Opportunities

Jenny Chan

Since the late 1970s, China's integration into the global economy has greatly transformed migration patterns, labor relations, and worker self-organizing. Under the auspices of the state, China's market reform has restructured the working class and reshaped the law and labor policy. Aggrieved workers have used both legal and extra-legal strategies to make economic and political demands. Despite some modest labor gains in wages and social insurance benefits, workers' ability to organize remains severely restricted by employers and by the government. In times of crisis, workers have sought to establish self-help groups and reached out to labor activists for support. This chapter, in part based on the author's participation in cross-border labor rights groups in Hong Kong and the mainland, will assess the changing relationship between the Chinese state, labor, and capital over the past four decades. In this way, it could be said to be a workers' inquiry from above into the evolving technical composition of capital and workers' self-organized efforts to recompose their power in China.

Repression and relaxation oscillate in political governance. Chinese authoritarianism is strong and resilient despite widespread instabilities. The authorities have suppressed autonomous worker organizations while also opening some spaces for material concessions and policy improvements, thereby preserving the one-party rule even after the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe communist regimes had collapsed (Selden and Perry 2010; Lee 2014; Wedeman 2019; Howell and Pringle 2019). So far most worker-led actions have

been short-lived and eventually broken up. However, a transformation of worker leaders and their followers has also been taking place that has fueled the demand for more inclusive rights such as the right to unionize.

This chapter begins by exploring workers' attempts to organize independent unions amid the broader pro-democracy student movement and its brutal crackdown in spring 1989. During the 1990s and 2000s, in the face of moral condemnation, the reform-minded leadership deepened enterprise restructuring by shedding tens of millions of state sector jobs. Affected workers and pensioners, driven by a feeling that Chinese socialism was betrayed, staged waves of anti-privatization protests and demonstrations but were largely defeated. At the same time, rural migrants, who have become the mainstay of the export-oriented industry, have risen to resist systemic abuses and class exploitation. In restoring industrial harmony and boosting its legitimacy, the state has expanded legal rights protection and grievance redress mechanisms for hundreds of millions of workers. Important pro-labor measures aside, the central problem of worker representation has remained unresolved. Accordingly, in the absence of union leadership, workers organized to bargain collectively with employers. With the tightening grip of the Xi administration on civil society since 2013, worker organizing, including non-governmental organizations (NGO) and student activism, have been greatly controlled. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the challenges and opportunities for the development of a labor movement in a globalized China.

CONTENTIOUS POLITICS AND INDEPENDENT UNIONISM IN 1989

In the course of China's capitalist transition, economic livelihood was a major concern among working-class people. Between 1986 and 1988, ordinary residents in Beijing and in many other Chinese cities shouldered the rising costs of living resulting from bureaucratic corruption and runaway inflation. In the workplace, factory directors pitted workers against each other to increase output and labor productivity. Grievances accumulated over unequal pay and unfair work practices, among other specific disputes centering on

job responsibilities, labor discipline, and women workers' rights. The rising discontent was expressed by a shoe factory worker who told a journalist, "I cannot afford a decent life so naturally there is anger in me ... When I hear our leaders speak of 'reform,' I know that means the price of food is about to increase ... [Inflation and corruption make] rich men of party cadres and leave the masses behind" (cited in Walder 1989: 34). The balance of power has indeed been shifting from the working masses to the management.

In the spring of 1989, emboldened by the university students' call for democracy and liberty, workers demanded the resignation of their dictator-like directors. In their workplaces and residential quarters, they aggregated demands through face-to-face meetings and coordinated protest actions. At a larger scale, the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation, an independent worker-led organization, called for price stabilization, opposition to political oligarchy, and freedom of association (Walder and Gong 1993). While workers had been excluded from student organizations during the early stages of the movement, the emerging unity between workers and student activists clearly presented a threat to the regime. In the eyes of the government, the "political turmoil" was the largest since the birth of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Saich 1990: 199).

Following the bloody crackdown on the popular movement on June 4, 1989 in Tiananmen Square, the Beijing leaders took both repressive and conciliatory approaches to put things in order. Prominent worker organizers and student leaders were arrested and imprisoned, while a few others were forced into exile. State surveillance at the workplace and in local neighborhoods was strengthened with military backing, thereby consolidating the topmost leadership (Lee and Hsing 2010). At the same time, the reformers established new mechanisms to guarantee workers' basic rights to redress grievances while speeding up economic reform to attract investment and secure export markets to boost growth. The broad direction was to liberalize the economy by encouraging competition and raising income for the majority, so much so that inefficient firms were shut down on a massive scale. This state-guided economic restructuring process resulted in contradictory outcomes, including job losses for many.

WORKERS' PLIGHTS, PROTESTS, AND STRIKES

By 2002, over 60 million urban workers had been laid off as a result of the privatization and reorganization of state firms. This amounted to “a 44 percent reduction of the 1993 state sector workforce within a 10-year period” (Hurst 2009: 16). Official statistics also showed that state sector jobs as a share of urban employment fell sharply from “76 percent in 1995 to 41 percent in 2000 to only 27 percent in 2005” (Park and Cai 2011: 17). Simultaneously, state bank loans and subsidies were provided to new private investors and foreign enterprises, alongside large state firms. Labor relations have become more unstable with the end of job tenure for state sector workers and the intensified competition for profits between firms.

During this period, disgruntled workers engaged in anti-privatization campaigns to fight for their rights and interests. Government statistics showed that the number of “mass incidents,” which covered strikes, protests, riots, demonstrations, collective petitions, and other forms of civil unrest, were on the rise. The cases of mass incidents stood at 8,700 in 1993, increased to 32,000 in 1999, and surpassed 58,000 in 2003 (Tanner 2005: 2). In 2005, the number reached 87,000, an average of 240 incidents each day (Xinhua 2006). These documented mass incidents were carried out by workers *and* many others over a wide range of issues, ranging from unpaid wages to land seizures and environmental degradation. These rapidly rising numbers indicate that social conflicts and class inequalities were getting more serious.

Not only state workers but also rural migrants had taken collective action in intolerable situations, although they had *not* united to form a common front. In other words, they did not succeed in recomposing their class power to successfully advance their claims and respond to the newly emerging technical composition of capital. Intra-class fragmentation and intra-group divisions were not overcome. The rights entitlement of urban workers varied widely according to their financial standing, the organizational capacities of their work organizations, and their own rank and seniority. While some workers would accept the compensation agreements, others rejected them (Lee 2007; Pillion 2009). In the absence of strong leadership and mobilization,

mutual support and cohesion between workers became weaker and weaker, exposing them to divide and rule strategies (Chen 2017). From the early to mid-2000s, as the new government launched job retraining programs and other social assistance projects for the most adversely affected workers and their families, large-scale resistance subsided (Solinger 2009). In short, the introduction of social welfare programs managed to defeat existing forms of worker organization.

Chinese migrants from the countryside, however, had long been deprived of access to public healthcare services or other social support in the city. They often experienced discrimination and social exclusion as second-class citizens. They were placed in dangerous, dirty, and difficult jobs with low wages. From factories to offices and construction sites, as Anita Chan (2001) meticulously detailed in *China's Workers under Assault*, nonpayment or underpayment of wages and benefits, illegal dismissals, and occupational injuries and diseases were rampant. A despotic factory regime characterized the accumulation of capital in the fast-expanding special economic zones across China. Rural migrant workers relied heavily on their family and kinship ties, as well as local and social networks spun in the workplace, for daily support. Many of them lived, and still live, in shared dormitories or small rental apartments to make ends meet. Today, in megacities like Beijing (21.7 million people) and Shanghai (24.2 million), internal migrants make up about 40 percent of those residing in the city (Hurst and Sorace 2019: 349). Nationwide, the rural migrant laborers reach some 288 million, making up one fifth of the total Chinese population (National Bureau of Statistics 2019).

Chinese workers have potentially strong *workplace bargaining power* in a densely integrated production system at the heart of the globalized economy; that is, they have the power to “cause costly disruptions via direct action at the point of production” (Silver 2014: 52). If the first generation of migrants were silent in their workplaces out of fear of the consequences of speaking up, the second cohort of the post-1980 generation—who arguably possess a stronger organizing capacity with a better mastery of mobile communications technologies than their predecessors—have stood up to voice their grievances and make two kinds of demands or claims (Elfstrom and Kuruvilla 2014). Defensive claims refer to workers’ demands for

the basic standards set forth in the labor laws, such as the statutory minimum wage, to be met. By contrast, offensive or more progressive claims refer to workers' fight for higher wages and better benefits *above* the legal limit.

In China, the official count of strikes is not publicly available. As early as 1975, the provision for the "right to strike" was incorporated into the amended Constitution of the People's Republic of China. The Constitution enacted in 1978 also stipulates that citizens have the "freedom of strike" and other civil rights. The "freedom of strike" stipulation, however, was removed from the 1982 Constitution, as the Chinese state tightened its rule in response to democratic protests happening in Beijing and former Eastern Europe at that time (Chang and Cooke 2015). The revocation of the legal right did not end labor strikes, however.

The Hong-Kong-based China Labour Bulletin (CLB)'s Strike Map, with reference to reports of labor strikes collected from online news archives and other digital sources, recorded a total of 10,948 cases from January 1, 2011 to December 31, 2018. Still, the available data captured only a small subset of the population in light of the state's ubiquitous censorship. Geoffrey Crothall, Communications Director of CLB, has distilled the partially available government statistics to estimate that the Strike Map at best "accounts for about 5 to 10% of all incidents of workers' collective action in China" during the first five years of President Xi Jinping's rule, that is, between 2013 and 2017 (Crothall 2018: 28). In addition to strikes and protests, aggrieved workers had taken their bosses to court in an attempt to use labor law to press their demands and seek redress.

ARBITRATION AND LITIGATION OF LABOR DISPUTES

Local officials recognize the growing tensions and complexity of labor relations due to the diversification of ownership and the contractualization (rather than regularization) of employment. In 1993, as rural to urban migration accelerated, the central government extended institutional access to the resolution of labor disputes to rural migrant employees. The regulations laid down a three-stage process of mediation, arbitration, and litigation to give workers and

employers “an avenue to enforce legal rights directly through formal proceedings” (Ho 2003: 3). Grievances would first be handled by workplace-based labor dispute mediation committees before proceeding to government-administered arbitration and, if necessary, a civil suit. The consequence was that mediation sessions from within the enterprise were rendered less and less effective in settling critical labor conflicts.

Officials seek to divert open protests and massive strikes into the judicial system by streamlining the legal procedures. The first national labor law was promulgated in 1994 and came into force on January 1, 1995. In 1996, 48,121 labor disputes—including individual *and* collective cases that involved 189,120 persons in total—were accepted for arbitration. The number of arbitrated labor disputes continued growing rapidly. In 2008, at the start of the global economic crisis when tens of millions of workers were laid off, the number of cases skyrocketed to 693,465—nearly double from one year previously—involving more than 1.2 million laborers across the country. Following a brief decline, since 2011 the number of labor dispute cases has shot up annually, reaching an unprecedented 828,410 cases in 2016. This was a seventeen-fold increase in arbitrated disputes in the two decades between 1996 and 2016. In 2017, while standing at a high level, the number slightly dropped to 785,323 cases, involving 979,016 workers (China Labour Statistical Yearbook 2019).

“Using the law as a weapon” remains burdensome despite impressive legal reforms including the provision of government-operated legal aid services. For working people, particularly low-income rural migrants, access to affordable *and* effective legal representation is still hard to come by. “Since 2007, workers have become less likely to ‘totally win’ and more likely to only ‘partially win’ in labor arbitration” (Halegua 2016: 1), indicating that there are institutional barriers of time and cost to using the legal process. When either party is dissatisfied with the arbitration award, the disputant can appeal the case to the lower court. If dissatisfied with that outcome, the litigant can further appeal the verdict to the intermediate court whose ruling is final.

Judges often insist that cases be filed individually while handling collective lawsuits stemming from labor disputes. Feng Chen and Xin

Xu have shown how this individualization of collective labor actions fragments and isolates plaintiffs, thereby robbing workers of their strength in unity. For example, in 2009, a court in Dongguan city turned 39 collective disputes, involving groups ranging from 10 to 988 people, into 4,167 individual cases (Chen and Xu 2012: 94). This judicial intervention weakened the power of organized workers to access the court.

In *Against the Law*, Ching Kwan Lee observed that plaintiffs “do not necessarily see the law or the courts as a neutral or empowering institution in their fight against official corruption and abuse of power.” Still, without better alternatives, “many continue working through and around the law and its related trappings in the state apparatus” (2007: 260). Patricia Chen and Mary Gallagher also argue that “the atomizing effects of court procedures and legislation” has partially restrained “the development of a labor movement” in China (2018: 1033). What we have seen is workers oscillating between judicial and extrajudicial tactics for resolving conflicts in order to draw the attention of, and responses from, the government, media, and the concerned public (Chan and Selden 2019).

THE LIMITS OF LABOR LAW REFORM AND TRADE UNION PROTECTION

In China, as in many countries, rights are enshrined by law in such a way that workers are expected to act as “firefighters” who self-enforce their rights by sounding the “fire alarm” at labor departments and courts to force senior officials to uphold labor standards (Gallagher 2017). If workers sound the alarm by filing cases and the government consistently enforces worker protections, employers may anticipate the risk of a dispute and avoid the problem. But if enforcement is lax and punishment is mild, because local governments often prioritize attracting investment rather than enforcing laws and regulations, employers will likely ignore the letter and spirit of the law, and conflict will be prevalent. A persistent pattern is that although desperate workers sound the fire alarm, serious problems such as nonpayment of wages and abuse by management continue and remain unresolved. “At the heart of poor working conditions,” Eli Friedman and Ching

Kwan Lee (2010: 514) show, is the fundamental imbalance of power between workers and employers at the point of production.

Under the Chinese Trade Union Law, Article 10 stipulates that all types of enterprises with 25 employees or more are supposed to have “basic-level trade union committees” on the shopfloor (Trade Union Law 2001). However, independent union organizing is illegal. The enterprise union must be approved by the next higher level trade union. In this centralized organizational structure, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) monopolizes the power of union representation by imposing its authority over any group of organized workers on the shopfloor.

The ACFTU operates under the command of the ruling Communist Party and it primarily serves the state’s interests to preserve industrial peace and social stability. From 2003, against the backdrop of enterprise restructuring and the loss of old members, the ACFTU has extended its membership to rural migrant workers, who have been increasingly recruited to both the state and private sectors. However, workers have cause to generally lack confidence in official trade unions. Surveys of enterprise union leaders consistently reveal that the majority are concurrently personnel department heads or senior managers who normally stand with management rather than with workers (Kong 2012).

Chinese officials consistently fail to protect workers’ union rights from management retaliation. A typical example is the continued control by the Foxconn trade union. Since 2007, the company union has been led by a senior female manager appointed by Terry Gou, the corporate founder. In the aftermath of a spate of employee suicides in 2010, Foxconn attempted to improve communications with employees through the publication of free company newspapers, the sponsorship of social and entertainment activities, and above all the expansion of its union membership. However, Aurret van Heerden, the Fair Labor Association’s president and CEO (2003–13) and Apple’s commissioned auditor (2012–13), found that “the Foxconn union does hold elections but the candidates are often management-nominated” (2012: 280). In 2015, Foxconn supervisors were widely accused of manipulating the union elections by instructing workers to cast their votes for designated candidates. Out of fear of retaliation,

workers followed the instructions. Clearly, the new rounds of “elections” of union leadership at Foxconn have been done as a formality that would leave intact the structure of power of the union. Some workers learned about the very existence of their unions only when they received souvenirs, such as water bottles bearing the union logo, from union staff members (Chan, Selden and Pun 2020).

In the face of growing labor conflicts, the ACFTU is slowly reforming itself to become more responsive to the workers. Trade union officials, along with judges and lawyers, have proactively mediated in negotiations with company executives and worker representatives in an attempt to reach a quick settlement onsite (Su and He 2010; Elfstrom, 2019). For example, the imminent relocation of a Walmart store in Changde city of Hunan province prompted a one-off, union-led closure bargaining in June 2014, winning a severance payment for all the affected workers (Li and Liu 2018). In a few cases, provincial and municipal unions have intervened to facilitate re-elections of workplace union leaders during post-strike negotiations. However, the elected worker representatives and union committee members were invariably harassed or even dismissed by management thereafter (Chan and Hui 2014; Kuruvilla and Zhang 2016).

Much more rare is any recognition of self-organized workers’ unions. Remarkably, in 2006, after a strike against gross underpayment of minimum wages and non-provision of labor contracts at an Ole Wolff electronics factory, workers succeeded in setting up a union through elections to take matters into their own hands. They clearly demonstrated workers’ subjectivity and trade union consciousness. The birth of the elected workplace trade union marked a new page of grassroots labor struggle (Au 2009). In a broader context, the ACFTU accelerated its unionization drive by officially recognizing the Ole Wolff elected workplace trade union and reaching out to workers at major foreign invested firms (Chan 2015).

Interestingly, the Yantian International Container Terminal trade union “developed a system of annual collective bargaining” after the 2007 strike in Shenzhen city in Guangdong (Pringle and Meng 2018: 1053). Disruptions can negatively affect the upstream and downstream linkages of the entire logistics and maritime and ground transportation chain. One critical factor in the longshore workers’

success is the militancy of crane operators—middle-aged male rural migrants with low turnover—who display a high degree of bargaining power at one of the world's busiest ports in the capital intensive sector in South China. The elected workplace union leaders serve dockworkers' interests to negotiate with management on a regular, rather than one-off, basis. Through their participation in the collective bargaining, dockworkers exercise their associational power while accepting the institutional supervision of the union federation across different levels.

Nevertheless, a representative enterprise level union is highly exceptional in the Chinese political economy. Both management and the government guard against organized labor while prioritizing profitability and stability. Workers' participation in trade union decision-making processes remains severely restricted. Consequently, workers frequently bypass unions and seek assistance from non-state organizations when applying for labor arbitration or taking part in strikes.

THE EMERGENCE OF GRASSROOTS LABOR ORGANIZATIONS

Since the 1990s, with the deepening of transnational and transborder social links characteristic of neoliberal globalization, grassroots organizations in Hong Kong and on the Chinese mainland have emerged to cope with the growing needs of worker organizing. Hong Kong-based *China Labour Bulletin*, founded in 1994 by mainland Chinese activist and independent union organizer Han Dongfang (who was imprisoned for participating in the 1989 Democracy Movement), was among the first NGOs to promote and defend workers' rights on the mainland. Other Hong Kong-registered labor rights NGOs (such as the Chinese Working Women Network and Labour Action China), comprising workers, social workers, academics, movement lawyers, and other concerned individuals, have also played a pioneering role in building a nascent class-based Chinese force through local and global solidarity (Chan 2005; Leung 2015).

Labor NGOs, through their workers' centers or community networks, usually provide social and cultural services, legal consultation, leadership training, and gender rights awareness workshops to

male and female workers in major industrial districts (Lee and Shen 2011). Worker activists, some of them injured in workplace accidents or by occupational diseases, have joined these autonomous organizations as volunteers or staff members to emphasize safety and health protection by visiting workers' dormitories and hospitals. They have also disseminated legal knowledge and practical know-how to support workers to win work-related injury compensation and unpaid wages, thus gaining trust and confidence from workers and their families (Chan 2013; Xu 2013).

At the workplace level, some labor NGOs have experimented with partnerships with multinational corporations (such as Reebok and HP) to coordinate corporate social responsibility programs to improve supply chain labor, social, and environmental governance (Chan 2009; Chan 2012). Dialogue between workers and employers at supplier factories is encouraged under this voluntary private self-regulatory framework. On a few occasions, direct trade union elections have taken place in the presence of independent observers and assessors. But the expansion of such corporate-facilitated labor rights programs in the context of transnational production remains uncertain. Commercialization and marketization of the training projects aside, the outcomes of labor participation on the shopfloor will depend heavily on workers' agency and collective resistance, as well as the continuous monitoring and concerted actions of local and international labor organizations.

Beyond the corporate-led governance framework, there have been instances in which NGO activists have directly intervened in labor strikes and protests. Instead of leading or organizing contentious actions, however, they have mostly tried to prevent them from escalating by resolving the labor crises through legitimate, nonviolent means, such as offering constructive suggestions in collective negotiations with employers (Pringle 2018; Franceschini and Lin 2019). Indeed, provincial government officials have facilitated collective bargaining by implementing new labor laws intended to maintain production and social stability in Guangdong, which had long been plagued by big and small labor incidents. However, in response to strong opposition from employers and business associations, the government weakened the major provisions in successive drafts of

what became the Regulations on Enterprise Collective Contracts in Guangdong, which came into force on January 1, 2015 (Standing Committee of Guangdong Provincial People's Congress 2014). Article 18 stipulates that over 50 percent of the workforce must endorse the formal call for compulsory talks to take place, a formidable obstacle to worker actions.

In a meeting with the union leadership in Beijing, President Xi reiterated that “trade unions should adhere to the employee-centered working approach; focus on the most pressing, most immediate issues that concern the employees the most; and fulfill the obligation of safeguarding workers’ rights and interests and sincerely serving workers and the people” (Xinhua 2018). Facing mounting pressure from above and below, the ACFTU has begun contracting with selected NGOs to deliver social and legal services to marginalized groups, such as women migrant workers, migrant children, youth and the elderly, in order to build a harmonious society (Howell 2015). This is a penetrating and more subtle way to achieve “social management” at the community level. At the same time, movement-minded NGOs have been squeezed and driven underground.

Labor organizers coached workers to take *individual actions*, rather than collective protests, to make their urgent appeals. This strategy is a tactical innovation for rights activists to address the critical threats to organizational survival from repression and cooptation (Fu 2017). In the rights defense process, labor organization leaders offered much needed support to individual workers at the backstage, framed the problems, and formulated media strategies to press for economic compensation for their grievances. In successful cases, worker claimants have demonstrated their class consciousness by transforming themselves into core members to support fellow workers by sharing their own experience.

In massive conflicts, however, labor organizing can hardly be covered up. Conflicts over toxic poisoning, unpaid wages, and illegal firings, to name just a few examples, often involve a large number of workers. The collective nature of labor discontent requires effective online and offline mobilization, making worker leaders more difficult to hide from the authorities. Following the state assault on feminist groups in March 2015 and on human rights lawyers in July, labor

activists from several NGOs based in Guangdong were arrested in December (Franceschini and Nesossi 2018). Meng Han, who helped a group of shoe factory workers to recover unpaid social insurance before the factory's planned closure and relocation, was jailed for 21 months, while three other activists of the Panyu Migrant Workers Service Center had their sentences suspended. This heightened control of civil society shows the government's overriding concern is for economic growth and political stability, rather than realizing greater collective rights for its citizens.

CONTENTIOUS STATE-LABOR RELATIONS IN CHINA

Fundamentally, the "representation void" remains unfilled. Workers do not find government-controlled and management-dominated unions a reliable ally (Kuruvilla 2018: 1020). When massive strikes do occur, either employers or government officials require workers to elect representatives, generally limited to five, to engage in talks. Once worker representatives are elected, the company moves to take control of the negotiations. This intervention typically marks the beginning of a fragmentation, cooptation, and crushing of worker power.

To prevent company retaliation, protesting workers have learned through bitter experience to protect each other in a collectivity that presents no visible leaders. In many other cases, however, worker leaders have been quickly identified. Yanhua Deng and Kevin O'Brien (2013) focus on "relational repression" as a strategy for controlling protest. By pressuring the families, relatives, friends, and significant others of target protesters, the authorities manipulate "social ties" and "feelings of affection" to defuse collective protest before escalation. This labor-intensive process of "stability maintenance" involves an irreducible amount of psychological pressure inflicted on those seeking justice (O'Brien and Deng 2017).

Heavy-handed repression is an integral part of Chinese authoritarianism, precisely because the "soft" means of protest absorption and other forms of social containment do not always work. "Dishing out cash payments or other material benefits in exchange for compliance" can only go so far, especially when the principled protesters refuse to

back down by taking the money (Lee and Zhang 2013: 1486). Where a resolution cannot be reached, stability-sensitive officials may detain a large number of “trouble making” citizens to deter further action (Chen 2012).

Some veteran activists and organizers remain undeterred, boldly establishing their own organizations after they have been fired or released from prison, a practice that Feng Chen and Xuehui Yang (2017) call “exit with voice.” These labor leaders have developed “indigenous” groups to advocate for workers’ rights by adapting to the changing economic and political contexts (Chan 2018). In 2016, for example, two former Walmart employees took the lead to mobilize against the corporate implementation of a flexible hour system and a significant wage cut through online strategizing. They moderated an internet-based forum under the banner of the Walmart Chinese Workers’ Association, breathing new life into a self-organized network linking Walmart workers across multiple cities in China. While the momentum of the movement died down following a split over worker strategies, coupled with management attacks and government intimidation, the experience was not entirely negative. Walmart workers enthusiastically debated the timing and effectiveness of strikes, among other key questions over fundraising and coordination, demonstrating their active participation, reflexivity, and capacity to devise their own tactics, strategies, and organizations.

A new wave of clampdowns on worker organizing soon followed. In July 2018, the state targeted a core group of workers who organized to form a trade union at the Jasic welding machinery factory in Shenzhen. The police detained 30 individuals, including workers, their families and friends, and one female university student, on July 27 (Amnesty International 2018). On August 24, in yet another coordinated raid, 50 student activists—the backbone of the Jasic Worker Solidarity Group—were interrogated, harassed, and warned to immediately stop taking part in the “illegal activities” or face criminal charges. While the majority of the 80 protesters were later released, four workers were formally arrested (Chan 2019).

During the fall and winter semesters of 2018, national security officials and their university cadres shut down Marxist study groups and related student associations in an effort to remove the institu-

tional support for the Jasic workers and their allies. As Au (2019) has succinctly observed, “though Xi Jinping continues to demand the people learn from Marxism-Leninism and Mao’s thought, the state continues to crack down on any independent and collective effort at seriously studying left classics—and to crack down even harder when these efforts carry an aspiration to sympathize with working people.”

It was estimated that, between January and May 2019, more than a dozen activists (from eight labor NGOs, social work organizations, community service centers, and a law firm) were detained or arrested, even though they do not appear to be linked to the Jasic labor struggle (Chinese Human Rights Defenders 2019). To nip the emerging alliance between workers and activists in the bud, the Chinese government has clearly cast a wide net to contain and suppress various forms of social and worker organization. Under such conditions, worker self-organization has remained fragmented and limited even though it continues to be widespread.

CONCLUSION

The clashing interests and intentions *within* and *across* the many elements in the Chinese state are complex. Since the 1980s labor market liberalization, state and employer offensives against self-organized workers have simultaneously provoked resistance. Although both government reform initiatives and workers’ demands have resulted in expanded workplace rights, many of those rights remain aspirational and go unenforced. Worse, concessions have been accompanied by repression. In recent years, the political environment for those working on labor rights issues in China, notably self-organized workers, NGOs, student activists, social workers, and lawyers, has been much constrained.

Will the government take firmer action to protect workers in a slowing economy? Despite rising levels of workers’ struggle and social activism in China, there are reasons to be pessimistic about the outlook for worker organizing, democratically controlled unions, and obtaining and defending workplace rights. The state has turned to deploying significant coercion to combat worker challenges, espe-

cially as it appears that workers are attempting to recompose their power.

But the brighter side is that workers—in and through their successive fights—have accumulated organizing experience, leadership skills, and the capacity to make their legitimate claims. Xi's iron fist suppression of young Marxists has sparked growing anger from leftists on China's political spectrum and in the international community (Pun 2019; Chan 2020). If Chinese labor protest is to transcend localized actions in dispersed sites of resistance to span whole industries, it will be necessary to build a broad-based social movement that wins support both at home and abroad.

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