

WORKERS'

INQUIRY

AND *Strategies,
tactics,
objectives*

GLOBAL

CLASS *Edited by
Robert
Ovetz*

STRUGGLE

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.

Wildcat publishes ambitious and innovative works on the history and political economy of workers' movements and is a forum for debate on pivotal movements and labour struggles. The series applies a broad definition of the labour movement to include workers in and out of unions, and seeks works that examine proletarianisation and class formation; mass production; gender, affective and reproductive labour; imperialism and workers; syndicalism and independent unions, and labour and Leftist social and political movements.

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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