

COMMENT

From Manchester to Zhongshan

THE WAY CHINESE CAPITALISM is marching ahead seems to be puzzling to China watchers throughout the world. In truth even die-hard anti-communists in America and elsewhere no longer see any danger coming from Chinese communism. Instead they are afraid of growing Chinese capitalism. What a tragedy! And tragically enough Chinese capitalism is thriving on a Dickensian world of brutalities that Chinese workers face day in and day out.

Then as now, Chinese workers are subjected to working days of 12 hours or more, tyrannical supervision, and pitiful wages. It's not very surprising to see that at least a dozen workers at a single electronics factory in China have committed suicide in the past year. The working and living conditions confronting millions of Chinese workers are desperate, and they directly (and mostly negatively) impact the prospects for working people around the world.

But there's only so much that workers, even those living under a harshly repressive regime, can tolerate before fighting back. In recent weeks a wave of strikes for higher wages and better working conditions has rocked a series of Chinese manufacturing centres, challenging the exploitation and resulting social inequalities that have fuelled China's rapid economic growth in recent decades.

The current unrest seems to have begun with a strike at a Honda transmission plant in the southern city of Foshan in late May. All 1,900 workers walked off the job to demand wages commensurate with those of Honda's assembly plant workers, a demand for a 75 percent wage increase. After about two weeks on strike, the transmission workers won an increase of 24 to 32 percent.

This strike, which shut down Honda's production lines around the country, inspired additional strikes against the company in Foshan and elsewhere. Days after the first strike was settled, workers at an exhaust system factory in Foshan walked off the job to demand higher wages, and they were joined almost immediately by workers who shut down at least two auto parts factory and two assembly plants. As the strikes spread, they seem to be taking on something of a political character as well.

Why has the strike wave happened now, and why haven't they been suppressed yet by the Communist Party? According to the excellent Hong Kong-based China Labour Bulletin, demographic changes and government policy likely explain much of the recent wave of worker unrest. China's one child policy has allowed families to focus all of their resources on that one child, raising expectations and alleviating poverty. The Internet, while still heavily filtered, has allowed Chinese workers to learn about the struggles of others and has aided the circulation of discontent. A labour shortage has given workers more leverage to make previously unrealistic demands; certain government policies have increased investment in rural areas and diversified Chinese industry, giving workers more employment options; and pressure to improve wages and living conditions has partially come from the government itself.

But the Beijing government is unlikely to concede the demand for the formation of independent trade unions as raised by auto-parts workers in Zhongshan and elsewhere. And yet the bamboo curtain is crumbling. Reports on how Chinese workers are being brutalised are pouring in. Minor politicisation of Chinese workers even in the arena of western-style collective bargaining may be a small thing but even a murmur against the authoritarian regime is viewed by democrats and liberals across the world as a welcome step forward. □