

COMMENT

Robots and Chinese Labour

Automation is the ultimate weapon in the hands of employers who continually search for ways to bash labour and minimise labour cost. Threat of automation also stands in the path of unionisation of industrial workers. The level of automation in the West or for that matter in industrially advanced Japan—is not comparable with what goes on in the name of modernisation in India, thanks to bania culture that projects a unique mixture of computer and Lord Ganesh's blessings. But it is not really the case in China where communists turned capitalists are aggressively introducing robots to curb labour's dissent and keep wage-earners worried all the time. Automation through roboting in shop-floor activities kills jobs and social security as well.

Workers who created a wave of strikes in China from auto and electronics to steel over the past two years have confronted the power of private capital, the state and the Communist Party. In 2011 alone, China's State Council acknowledged 500 large-scale "mass incidents" per day, including peasant resistance to land grabs as well as strikes.

An artificial labor shortage has helped workers, as factories informally blacklist all but young migrant workers who they expect to put up with inhumanly long hours, intensive labor and subsistence wages. Strike pressure in province after province to raise the minimum wage by as much as 30% has lifted the floor wage on average over 12% above rampant inflation.

Workers' protest, even suicides, spotlighted the life-endangering hours, 60 and even 80 hours a week, at Foxconn's Apple and Microsoft production facilities. Responding to public airing of grievances, Foxconn claimed to reduce overtime by pressuring workers to keep working, but off the books, for free. Even where Foxconn honestly reduced hours, workers were left impoverished on straight time.

Workers in Shenzhen who struck Panasonic's OHMS Electronics in March were recently allowed to elect their union leaders, as were workers at Hitachi's Shenzhen Hailiang Storage who had struck in December. This exposes that, until now, the official trade union had permitted the industry to fill union slots with their own executives.

"Strikes have regularly given rise to the invention and application of new machines. Machines were, it may be said, the weapon employed by the capitalist to quell the revolt of specialized labor." Thus observed Karl Marx.

Foreign investors 20 years ago forced Chinese workers at their benches to compete against heavily capitalized Western factories. Now one company alone, Foxconn with its 1.5 million workers across China, wants a million robots in its factories to undermine workers' power. □□□