

# Strike wave in China - now build factory committees

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Peter Main reports on important recent developments in the growing workers movement in China

A wave of strikes is developing in giant industrial cities such as Shenzhen and Dongguan in Guangdong province, the heartland of China's export industries. On 17 November, 7,000 workers from the Yue Cheng plant, that makes Adidas and Nike shoes, walked out over working conditions and withdrawal of overtime pay. After battling with police they returned to the plant but were reportedly still refusing to work a week later. The following week, 1,000 strikers at Jingmo Electronics in Shenzhen blocked a major highway as part of their campaign against excessive overtime and low pay.

The restoration of capitalism in China has created huge social tensions. Literally hundreds of thousands of "mass incidents" are officially recorded every year. The widely reported battles between police and the peasants of Wukan ?village?, also in Guangdong, over official corruption and land grabs, are unique only in the sense that they have been reported. Such clashes are actually relatively common. Nonetheless, the latest workers' strikes are particularly significant because they reveal important new developments.

Despite dictatorship, censorship and repression, workers are learning the lessons of past struggles, developing new tactics and, above all, organising themselves independently to fight for their own interests. In short, the tens of millions of peasants who have migrated to the cities every year for the last two decades are fast becoming a working class movement.

## Workers representatives

A major turning point was the Honda strike in Foshan, in Guangdong, 18 months ago. For the first time, striking workers won the right to elect their own negotiators instead of having to accept settlements agreed between the official trade unions and company managers. Because, in China, the official trade unions are constitutionally committed to promoting and maintaining production in conjunction with managements, workers' interests are never their main concern.

Unlike the Honda strike, which was for improvements in pay and conditions, many of today's strikes are essentially defensive, a response to the threat of redundancies or worsening conditions such as longer hours and fewer breaks. The demand for the direct election of workers' own negotiators, however, is becoming more common, clear evidence of workers in widely different industries learning from each other in struggle.

Coordination between different plants in the same company is also developing. The most important example of this, so far, came on November 14 when workers from PepsiCo bottling plants in 5 different cities staged demonstrations at the same time.

An increasingly common demand is for the payment of all backpay before the Chinese New Year at the beginning of February. This, too, points to a working class that is learning from the past to prepare for the future. Two years ago, in the midst of the global recession, many bosses waited for the Chinese New Year, when everyone who can returns to their home towns and villages, before closing their plants. When workers returned, not only was there no work but they had lost weeks - even months - of back pay that was owed to them.

Last year, when there was something of a recovery in world trade, workers were able to force up wage rates but now, faced with another downturn in the export industries, they are taking no chances.

The workers are absolutely right in their fears for what next year might bring. As well as the export industries that are already being hit by the downturn in Europe and the USA, production for the domestic market has also slowed in recent months. The latest projections suggest a decline in China's growth rate to 8.4 per cent, down from 9.1 per cent this year. In November, industrial production actually shrank for the first time in nearly 3 years. Looming on the horizon is the prospect of a financial crisis created by speculation in the real estate market and loans for investment projects that are proving unprofitable.

The growing confidence and levels of organisation in the workers' movement has not gone unnoticed by the Beijing government. The state-controlled trade unions, in the All China Federation of Trades Unions (ACFTU) have been instructed to play a greater role in negotiating agreements on behalf of workers. They have even sent delegations to Europe to learn from their fellow bureaucrats how to negotiate with employers. This is a completely novel experience for Chinese trade unions which generally function as simply a branch of management with responsibility for welfare and leisure facilities, never as representatives of the workers' separate interests.

How to relate to the official trade unions, particularly if they do make a turn towards more effective negotiation, is one of the most important issues facing the workers' movement in China. Although there have been isolated examples of activists establishing new branches of the existing unions in an attempt to achieve greater representation and avoid bureaucratic control, there are no reports of the successful establishment of new unions outside the ACFTU framework.

### **Relations to the official unions**

Given the extent of party control and the legal situation, it is unlikely that such new unions could be built directly out of the current strike wave. At the same time, there is absolutely no possibility that the official trade unions could be transformed into effective representatives of the working class' interests. That, like all democratic reforms, would be a direct threat to the Communist Party's dictatorship.

What would be possible, however, would be to extend the principle of electing the workers' own negotiators. Revolutionaries and working class activists in China could build on what has already been won by calling for the formation of elected factory committees as permanent bodies, a step forward from temporary negotiating teams. The same principles of election and recallability should also apply to the election of strike committees. In this way, at the most fundamental level, in the factories, the workers can begin to build organisations under their own control, even if, formally, they develop within the framework of the official unions.

Such factory committees could also be the foundations of broader working-class organisation. They could create links and coordinate action not only between different plants in the same company, or different companies in the same industrial sector, but also across industrial sectors, across whole cities and regions, indeed the whole country.

At some point, it is inevitable that this new working class movement, directly responsive to the great mass of workers, and fighting to defend their present and future interests, will clash with the priorities of the official unions and the state that controls them. In that situation, it would be necessary to appeal to any workers still loyal to those unions and even to the leaders of those unions themselves, to break from the state, which is now the state of Chinese capital, and take the side of the workers.

However, it would be the worst possible error to wait for such a break. On the contrary, the workers' new organisations must be prepared to act independently of the existing unions, creating new, independent trade unions and demanding their recognition when that becomes both possible and necessary.

The next phase in the global financial crisis will heighten the social tensions that are already so visible in China. Chinese capitalism, already emerging as a new imperialist power, will seek to suppress those tensions in order to buttress its international strength. It may do this by outright repression, as was done after the Tiananmen Massacre. Alternatively, it could use a policy of divide and rule, making concessions to the best organised, or most strategically important, sections of workers in order to prevent the emergence of a unified working-class movement, which could potentially number 450 million.

This was the tactic that ultimately proved most successful in the other major imperialist powers over the last century. The development of a reformist workers' movement, based on a better paid "aristocracy of labour" and controlled by a stratum of bureaucrats, maintained stability at home when the imperialist governments launched their wars of conquest. Divisions within the working class between skilled and unskilled, male and female, black and white, plus xenophobic loyalty to their own governments, ensured profitable exploitation of the majority at home and abroad.

To prevent a repetition of this in China is a task that goes beyond trade unionism. It is a political task and, for that, a political party is necessary. The activists and militants who are fighting now to defend workers' interests and build workers' organisations, must be won to the building of a party committed not only to the interests of the Chinese workers but of all workers and oppressed around the world, the Chinese section of a new, Fifth International.

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