



China's factory workers are becoming more restive

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It's been chiseled into the minds of Chinese bureaucrats – they must “maintain social stability” to climb the career ladder. This amounts to a license for clamping down on any sign of disturbance. Increasing numbers of strikes have been met with vigorous suppression.

About a third of the reported protests in the country over the past year are over labor issues. Most are staged by workers from China's countryside who migrated to cities in search of work. They make up about 60 percent of China's industrial workforce, providing almost all the workers in the export industries that fill stores around the globe with goods. Guangdong Province, just north of Hong Kong, contains the biggest concentration of such factories in China and has witnessed the largest surge in worker protests.

Most demands are over unpaid wages, under-paid wages or poor work conditions, due to employers breaching the law. Workers take to the streets only when management and local authorities ignore their grievances. They block roads, forcing authorities to pay attention. In the first quarter of 2015, 11 large factory strikes in Guangdong escalated into violence between workers and police, estimates one Hong Kong NGO.

Unlike workers in other Asian countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia and Bangladesh, Chinese workers had not challenged government policies – targeting the government for an increase in the legal minimum wage or asking to eliminate China's household registration system that consigns migrant workers to temporary residence in cities and denies them access to public services. They had not demanded a right to set up alternatives to inactive branches of China's one official trade union run by the government, which normally lets factory managers select union representatives.

A transformation in labor protests is underway. For the first time, some workers demand wage raises far above the minimum wage. Some have become aware that they need representation, and thus some protests demand to hold democratic workplace union elections to replace the management-controlled union branch.

Last year, in the largest strike in Guangdong of the last three decades, more than 40,000 workers went on strike at a vast shoe factory in the city of Shenzhen. The factory, owned by the Taiwanese firm Yue



Yuen, the world's biggest footwear manufacturer, produces running shoes for major brands. The strikers had an unusual demand: that the company pay for back years of unpaid employer contributions toward their retirement, which in Shenzhen legally should be 13 percent of employees' total wages.

In early April this year, 5,000 workers at another shoe factory demanded payment of years of unpaid employer contributions to a housing subsidy fund, also mandated by law and worth 5 percent of salary. For many years almost all workers from the countryside were in their 20s, and they paid little attention to the retirement or housing funds, which are seldom respected by factory owners. With some retaining their jobs into their 30s and 40s, many realize they have been short-changed. The accumulated debts owed to thousands of workers, running into many millions of dollars, have serious implications for company finances. One survey suggested that only 20 percent of enterprises may contribute the full amount.

Workers' worries are exacerbated by the fact that some foreign investors, always scouring for low-wage investment sites, have been relocating manufacturing from Guangdong to cheaper inland provinces or overseas to South and Southeast Asia. Vietnam, for instance, has overtaken China as the leading exporter of garments to the US market. Some cities in Guangdong like Dongguan, once a favorite destination of Taiwanese manufacturers, are now deindustrializing. When relocating, some companies simply refuse to honor their obligations, leaving workers stranded with unpaid wages and years of unpaid employer contributions to the funds.

Demographic changes in the migrant workforce increase the workers' willingness to protest. The popular image of young, inexperienced, poorly-educated, unmarried and submissive young women no longer applies to today's migrant workers. Young women used to make up some 80 percent of the manufacturing workforce in labor-intensive industries like toys and electronics assembly. Employers avoided hiring men, regarding them as less dextrous and obedient. Managers hired men mostly for heavy physical labor or dangerous tasks such as stamping or welding. But with the shortage of young female workers apparent by 2004-5, discriminatory hiring practices were abandoned. Even the garment industry hires lots of men.

Until a decade ago, the great majority of the migrant workers returned to their villages when they were no longer in their physical prime. Today, as many more manage to stay in the cities and continue working, these 40-year-olds – realizing this is the last chance to collect their fair share of social insurance and housing subsidies before retirement – are the drivers behind the demand for entitlements, whereas younger workers are more intent on pushing for higher wages.

Thanks to the proximity to Hong Kong, Guangdong's labor activism is the country's most vibrant. Two decades ago Hong Kong NGOs quietly crossed the border into Guangdong and set up labor NGOs. Trying to avoid the authorities, the NGOs advised workers about illegal labor practices. Since then, indigenous Chinese-run labor NGOs, worker centers and *pro bono* advisers on labor law have sprung up



throughout the province. As a result, Guangdong workers tend to have a better understanding of their legal rights than elsewhere in China.

Many NGO staff members today are middle-aged men who had previously worked in jobs susceptible to industrial accidents. After losing fingers, hands, or arms they had battled for workers compensation through the court system, and the protracted legal process turned them into “barefoot” legal experts who help other workers litigate for compensation and unpaid wages. Local government authorities and the state security bureau regard these NGOs as instigators of instability or bearers of a “color revolution.” In the two years since President Xi Jinping came to power, local governments in Guangdong have been cracking down on the NGOs and legal-advice offices.

In interviews, staff members report that local authorities tap their phones and computers, monitor their movements, and barge into their offices at odd hours to interrogate them about activities and contacts. Increasingly, landlords who rent out office space to such NGOs have been ordered to evict them. Some NGOs have had to move numerous times, disrupting stable grassroots contact with workers.

In interviews, NGO staff members express fear about the pressure, reporting that many colleagues have left and those who persist discuss contingency plans in case of arrests.

During recent months, the harassment has escalated into violence. As just one example among many, in early April violence erupted outside a Japanese-owned factory. When one NGO staff member visited an injured worker in the hospital, he was manhandled by a group of thugs outside, then detained and beaten by police. When released, the staff member was attacked again outside the door of the police station by masked men and hospitalized. Colleagues from other NGOs visited and also posted a blog listing their names – amounting to an open challenge to authorities to come to get them. A trade union and NGOs based in Hong Kong have launched a campaign to draw attention to the suppression, and China’s labor movement is entering a new stage.

For the time being the strikes and protests are confined to individual factories. But tensions are running high. Protests coordinating multiple workplaces could explode soon in Guangdong if local authorities do not address the workforce’s concerns.

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