

Transnational corporations in China

12 June 1999

To the editor:

I found James Conachy's June 4 article on China ("Ten Years Since Tiananmen Square Massacre," <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/jun1999/tian-j04.shtml>) to be a very illuminating Marxist analysis of the class struggle inside China, that led to the bloody events of Tiananmen Square.

In confirmation of the Conachy's conclusions on the role of the Chinese bureaucracy in repressing Chinese workers, on June 5, the Campaign for Labor Rights (CLR—CLR@igc.org) reported that "On May 28, three companies highly invested in China—Mattel, Levi Strauss and Reebok—announced that they had joined with 21 human rights, fair trade and socially responsible investment groups in endorsing a set of principles for corporations doing business in China.

"The principles include: no use of forced labor, wages sufficient for meeting basic needs, a reasonable number of work hours, no physical (or other) abuse, safe and healthy work sites, no solicitation of state repressive apparatus, respect for freedom of association and collective bargaining, non-discrimination, no targeting of political activists, environmentally responsible production methods and no child labor."

The CLR welcomes the endorsement of principles but does not expect them to be adhered to. It points out that Nike routinely violates its own set of "principles" in Indonesia and that Reebok's commitment to labor rights is merely for public relations.

Trim Bissell, national CLR coordinator, likens the miserable conditions for Chinese workers to a "planetary black hole," that attracts investments from all over the world, particularly in garment, sport shoes, and toys. Furthermore, China's repressive apparatus enforces a state of secrecy that allows "precious little light to escape, leaving consumers and labor rights advocates mostly in the dark about labor practices there.... China is becoming the ultimate destination of a number of cut-and-run companies. It is a dark star

around which we all revolve. "

The CLR attributes the "principles" to an attempt to whitewash the image of notorious sweatshop operators, and to salvage Clinton's policy of "constructive engagement." I believe also that the adoption of these "principles" responds to increasing resistance among Chinese workers to the conditions imposed on them.

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