

# Internet discussion in China on the exploitation of workers

John Chan  
9 June 2010

The recent strike by Chinese Honda workers and the wave of suicides at the giant electronics sweatshop operated by Foxconn in southern China have led to online discussions in Chinese about seeking alternatives to the brutal capitalist exploitation enforced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The predominantly young workers at Honda and Foxconn are among millions of Internet users in China. According to the China Internet Network Information Centre, 61.5 percent of the country's 384 million Internet users are below the age of 29 and only 12.1 percent have a university degree. Some 42.5 percent have a monthly income of \$US146 or less.

A random Internet searching with key words such as "working class", "strike" and "Foxconn", threw up widespread sentiments of class solidarity with the Foxconn and Honda workers, as well as striking workers in Europe and elsewhere. Comments apparently posted by workers were generally short but angry. Some called for "workers to unite, or the next could be us" to commit suicide. Others declared that there were only three paths for Chinese workers: "revolution, suicide or dragging on". Many postings had been deleted, in some cases by Internet police censors.

Anger is particularly widespread over the role of the state unions that have "become the running dogs of the capitalists" or "yellow unions" on behalf of the employers. Some comments linked Foxconn's rise from a small firm to a gigantic enterprise with Beijing's corrupt collusion with capitalists. Bureaucrats enjoyed "mansions, US dollars, fine wine and beautiful women", while young people had to "labour endlessly like robots in a bird cage for a minimum wage".

A participant in a May 25 blog on the Sina web site about the Foxconn suicides cited a recent US *Time* magazine nomination of "Chinese workers" as candidates for the "Man of the Year," whose cheap labour was crucial to prevent the global capitalist crisis from deepening. The blogger said workers in capitalist countries were not mentioned by *Time* because they had engaged in battles against capitalists, such as the strikes in Greece and the strike by British Airways workers.

Chinese workers had been "honourably" selected by *Time* for propping up world capitalism, the blogger wrote, because the Chinese government had banned action by workers to defend their rights. The blogger added that over the past three decades, the private capitalist sector had increasingly dominated the Chinese economy, allowing sweatshops like Foxconn to boom. "Even in the state and collective sectors, there is share ownership, giving corporate power to the chairman, the board and the bosses, and reducing workers to a position of complete subjugation and subordination."

The authorities would ruthlessly suppress any protests against such social injustices, the writer stated, so the only way forward is struggle. "Rise up, those who do not want to be slaves... the rights of the workers all over the world were won by workers' strikes, bloodsheds and sacrifices! Not granted from the conscience of the capitalists."

An online comment circulating among blogs and discussion sites, entitled "If Foxconn workers can also strike," accused the state-run All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) of expanding into foreign companies in order to suppress independent workers' struggles. And that Foxconn's suicides are the product of that policy. The author, a former journalist, claimed to have spoken with the head of the ACFTU in Guangdong province during 2001. The official had declared that banned political and religious organisations were fighting to win private sector workers from the regime, saying that "if you don't organise the masses, somebody will, and workers themselves will get organised, and that will threaten the position of the ruling party".

The blog said the real aim behind the expansion of ACFTU into the non-state sector is to maintain political stability. "Apart from this political purpose, local governments seeking higher GDP are bowing before capital, making disadvantaged workers completely helpless before powerful capital. The trade unions not only are not standing with the workers, but assisting the bosses to better organise production," the author wrote.

Another online forum posted Lenin's 1899 article "On Strikes". The blog pointed to recent strikes by Chinese workers, including at Honda, and declared that teachings of the "great revolutionary teacher Lenin" have "important practical implications" for the working class today. Lenin's farsighted article explained that the Russian workers' strikes against individual capitalists had to extend to the development of socialist political consciousness and the overthrow of the autocratic regime of the Tsar.

In the comments that followed on Lenin's article, one blogger noted: "Everywhere there are dry combustibles in China, what is lacking is a man to ignite it," adding that China must found the Communist Party again, as it did in 1921. Another participant wrote: "From the struggles unfolding before our eyes, the Chinese proletarians are awakening again from the brutal reality. It is time to consider firstly to establish independent unions, then build a new secret political organisation representing the interests of the proletariat" in order to overthrow the CCP regime. "No matter how complex is the struggle and despite the repression from China's privileged bureaucrats and bourgeoisie, this will probably and even inevitably emerge."

Such sentiments have raised concerns in ruling circles. In a May Day speech only weeks before the Honda strike, President Hu Jintao sought to pacify workers. He called the working class the "leading class" of the country—a term not used in China for many years. His speech sparked a wave of state media commentaries paying lip service to the working class's role in making China a world economic power. The media campaign ridiculously depicted the privileged party bureaucrats who have turned China into the sweatshop of the capitalist world as the "proletarian vanguard".

A comment, "The status of Chinese workers: the unbridgeable gap between theory and reality," posted on the semi-official *China Election and Governance Website* on June 4 illustrated the difficulties facing the party machine in fashioning ideological means to head off the industrial and political ferment.

The article noted that from childhood, Chinese people had been constantly told that in China the "working class controls the state power" but nevertheless learned about the reality of capitalist exploitation. The fact that workers committed suicide and take other forms of desperate action demonstrated that for working people, becoming the masters of their own lives was only a "remote dream".

The comment continued: "Intensive labour, continuing overtime, simple but repetitive work, rudimentary housing and shut-in military-style management, dull spare times and the

lack of humane caring—this is the life of workers. Such life is not the special condition at an individual sweatshop, or a single foreign-owned corporation. Imagine, if 'Made in China' goods are flooding the world, how many such sweatshops are needed to satisfy the 'honour' of being the 'workshop of the world'?"

The author Qing Wuyu (which appears to be a pen name) also discussed the Honda strike. Because the right to strike was removed from the constitution in 1982, he wrote, all strikes had to be approved by the ACFTU, which meant that it did not represent the workers, but "has reached a stage of causing conflict" with them.

Qing cited studies estimating that of the annual economic output, the state bureaucracy took 40 percent and corporate capital 40-50 percent, leaving working people just 15-20 percent. "In such a mode of distribution, who would believe the working class is in control of the state power, and is the leading force of the country?"

The conclusion of the article, however, was to express hope that the social injustices would awaken the "conscience" of the Chinese government and the entrepreneurs, who would legalise strike in order to allow workers to protect their basic rights. Qing argued that then trade unions could play a moderating role.

In reality, the conflicting class interests that the CCP represents and those of the Chinese workers and peasantry are irresolvable. An earlier Internet controversy erupted after the Chinese media reported that 91 percent of China's richest millionaires—those who owned assets of 100 million yuan (\$US14.6 million) or more—are children of senior CCP officials. China's 450,000 dollar millionaires, accounting for just 0.4 percent of the population, control 70 percent of the national wealth.

Such levels of social inequality, exacerbated by the widespread criminality and corruption of the CCP regime, are fuelling widespread discontent and anger that are finding their expression in Internet discussions, despite the censorship efforts of Beijing, and the first strivings for a genuine Marxist party to overthrow the police-state.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**