

Chinese workers revolt against the unions

John Chan
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The recent strikes of Chinese workers at Honda plants and other factories over low pay and harsh working conditions have raised important issues for the working class internationally. From the outset, the strikes have taken the form of an incipient rebellion, not only against management and local authorities, but against the state-controlled All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), which openly functions as the industrial policeman for the Beijing regime.

The demand by workers for independent organisations or trade unions has prominently featured in many of the disputes. At the Honda transmission plant in Foshan and Honda Lock in Zhongshan workers elected their own strike representatives to negotiate with management, rejecting attempts by ACFTU officials to intervene as “mediators”. Workers bitterly denounced the ACFTU as the “running dogs of the capitalists” and “traitors” to the working class.

The eruption of strikes in China could take place in no other way than against the ACFTU apparatus. The regime formed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949 was not based on genuine socialism but on Stalinism. It was deeply hostile to the working class from the outset. On entering the cities, the CCP’s peasant armies suppressed all independent workers’ struggles. The new regime established the ACFTU as a bureaucratic means of control in the workplaces.

The CCP’s class hostility to workers only intensified after it openly embraced the capitalist market in 1978. Terrified by the mass Solidarity strike movement in Poland in the early 1980s, Beijing sought to tighten its grip over the working class. In 1982, it removed the nominal right to strike from the constitution and in 1983 established the People’s Armed Police to suppress domestic unrest. In 1989, as workers joined students demonstrating in support of democratic rights, the CCP sent tanks and troops to crush the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. Workers were arrested throughout the country.

In the immediate aftermath of the massacre, newly

appointed CCP general secretary Jiang Zemin outlined the task of the ACFTU. “The biggest concern is workers’ economic grievances. If the workers rise up and rebel, we have a big problem. Trade union organisations must remain alert to any attempt to form [a Chinese equivalent of] Solidarity or similar political group,” he said.

The Tiananmen Square massacre was a signal to international capital that the CCP would not hesitate to use whatever means were necessary to suppress the working class. Foreign investment flooded into the country to take advantage of its vast reserves of cheap labour. In the 1990s, the ACFTU played a key role in containing the numerous protests and strikes that erupted against the wholesale privatisation of state-owned enterprises, which resulted in the lay-off of tens of millions of workers. Over the past decade, the ACFTU has aggressively expanded into the private sector, acting as an industrial police force for both local and foreign corporations.

Workers around the world confront similar obstacles. While the AFL-CIO in the United States or the ACTU in Australia may have different origins to those of the Chinese ACFTU, the union bureaucracies in every country have, over the past 30 years, been transformed into apparatuses that work in the closest collaboration with government and corporations in suppressing any independent activity by the working class. The trade unions have always been defenders of the profit system, seeking to use minor concessions as a means of preventing any wider revolt against the social order. However, with the rise of globalised production, the watchword of the unions is not the reformist slogan “a fair day’s work, for a fair day’s pay”, but the never-ending striving for “international competitiveness”. On behalf of employers, unions insist that workers sacrifice their jobs and conditions and produce more to be competitive with workers elsewhere.

Ideologically, the unions are hotbeds of chauvinism and protectionism, utilized to pit workers in one country against their class brothers and sisters elsewhere. During the recent

strikes in China, the AFL-CIO considered asking the Obama administration to investigate whether the suppression of the rights of Chinese workers constituted an “unfair [trade] advantage”. In other words, the American unions had not the slightest concern in ending the ruthless exploitation of the Chinese workers—including by major US corporations. The AFL-CIO’s only interest in their “rights” was whether they could use the issue as a device to protect weaker sections of American capital and to divert attention from their own role in destroying the jobs, pay and conditions of US workers.

Like their class brothers and sisters in China, workers in the US and other countries can only defend their most elementary rights in a rebellion against the unions, which function, essentially, like the Chinese police-state ACFTU. What is required is a complete break from the trade unions, and from the various middle class ex-radical organisations that keep workers chained to them. As was done at Honda’s plants in China, the first step is the election of rank-and-file committees of trusted workers to lead the struggle, and to turn out to other sections of workers facing similar problems. Only in this way can a powerful independent movement of the working class be constructed to abolish exploitation at its source—the profit system itself.

Such a struggle raises crucial political questions. In China, there are those who claim to be on the side of workers, who raise the demand for “independent trade unions” as an end in itself. Han Dongfang, former leader of the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation, who played a prominent role in the 1989 protests, now advocates “depoliticised” independent trade unions that are restricted to “collective bargaining” with employers. His *China Labour Bulletin* published a report in May urging the CCP regime in Beijing to accept such trade unions as a more efficient and cost-effective means of containing the emerging workers’ struggles.

It is vital that Chinese workers learn from the experiences of workers in other countries. The AFL-CIO, which had its origins in the mass sit-down strikes of American auto workers in the 1930s, similarly depoliticised the unions as it witchhunted socialists after World War II and subordinated workers to the Democratic Party. Today these unions operate arm-in-arm with government and the corporate elite. The United Auto Workers (UAW) was directly involved in the Obama administration’s “bail-out” of GM and Chrysler, sitting on the corporate boards as major shareholders, having pushed through agreements to slash wages and conditions.

Closer to home, the Korean Confederation of Trade

Unions (KCTU) emerged in the militant struggles of the South Korean working class in the 1980s against the military dictatorship. There was no doubting the courage and determination of its leaders as they faced police state repression. But their political perspective was limited to achieving union rights within the framework of capitalism. The KCTU was legalised in the 1990s and played a critical role in suppressing opposition to the abolition of the life-long employment system. Last year, the KCTU collaborated with the rightwing government of President Lee Myung-bak as it sent police to crush the protracted occupation of the Ssangyong Motor plant.

The crucial lesson is that militant struggle by itself is not enough. As the second stage of the global economic crisis unfolds, workers in every country are confronting, in one form or another, a deepening onslaught on their living standards—often by the same international corporations. As soon as they begin to fight for their rights, they confront the trade unions, operating as the industrial police for the government and the corporate elite. It is not a matter of reforming the unions, which are organically incapable of leading any struggle against capitalism, but of organising a conscious revolt against these bureaucratic apparatuses on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective. The only way that workers can defend their jobs, wages, living standards and basic rights is to unite globally in a common struggle to abolish capitalism and to reconstruct society to meet the needs of the overwhelming majority of humanity, rather than the profits of the wealthy few.

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