An interview with Dawn Mikkelson, co-director of The Red Tail

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Joanne Laurier of the WSWS recently spoke with Dawn Mikkelson, co-director of The Red Tail, *who was in the Detroit area for a showing of the film.*

Joanne Laurier: It's very unusual for a worker to decide to take this journey to find out where his job has gone and meet the worker who took it.

Dawn Mikkelson: The Koch family is unusual. Susan Koch was been very involved in peace and justice issues. They are well versed in globalization and outsourcing. So when Roy Koch was approaching this question, it was never from the point of view that he was angry with the workers in China. He knew there was something more going on, that he and his Chinese counterpart were being pitted against each other.

JL: This attitude is not encouraged by the government, union or media.

DM: There is a big difference in the way world events are covered in Hong Kong and China. They have a much broader world outlook. Their media actually covers the world. Every time I travel abroad, I'm always to shocked and frustrated by how our media is so insular and inward-looking.

JL: What was it like filming in Hong Kong and China?

DM: We discovered that most of our work had to be done on the ground as opposed to preparing interviews in advance online. In China in particular. We had to create those relationships and there is no other way than to go. So we did a lot of our pre-production while we were there.

When we arrived in Hong Kong, we learned that the bar benders [iron workers] were on strike. These are the guys who do the really heavy work in construction. It was a massive strike, the largest, we were told, in a century. When the Koch family got there, they were so moved by this group of workers doing the exact same thing they had done. And in China, the workers were so pleased to see that they had support from somewhere else.

JL: Were you able to talk to individual workers?

DM: We were, but a lot of this is not on camera. They did not want that kind of notoriety and we respected that. In mainland China, but also in Hong Kong, speaking your mind is not something you want to do. We were aware that there's a history of the subjects of documentary films disappearing after the film is done.

Workers were interested in the fact that we were there, although there was a different response from the bar benders in Hong Kong than there was from the mechanics. The mechanics were excited to meet Roy, although they understood their role in his life. They also understood that their jobs were not going to be there forever and felt somewhat threatened by that.

We went to China because we knew before we left the US that there was a maintenance company in Xiamen, a sister company to the Hong Kong company. What we did not know was that the workers in Hong Kong were being threatened with wage cuts because of the workers in China and that they were being played against each other. That is something we did not discover until we got to Hong Kong.

The trip to Xiamen took place nine months later because we had to come back and raise more money. In addition, there is all sorts of drama in shooting in China. We had to get tourist visas, because journalist visas mean that you have to be accompanied by a government official the whole time. We also learned that two other groups of filmmakers that were there at the same time had their gear confiscated because they had journalist visas when they entered the country. But once we were in the country, nobody was terribly concerned about us.

Our fantastic interpreter brought us to where the

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TAECO workers lived, where we nonchalantly walked in past security, who did not stop us. In comparison to some I've seen in other films, these conditions were better. So even though they were only paid $300 month, it's considered a good job in Xiamen.

JL: What do you think about the current strike wave in China?

DM: It's interesting that this is taking place outside of the "yellow unions." The fact that these workers identified with workers in other struggles, for example, in Europe, is one of the great features of the Internet in being able to break through the great firewall of China. One has access to the outside world in a way that is different than before. And people were very interested in where we came from, curious about New York, LA and so forth.

JL: Captured in your film is the commonality between workers globally.

DM: People perhaps thought that we went to China to confront the worker who "stole" Roy's job. There is a misconception that has been developed by the media, by the unions themselves. They have created an enemy that is not an enemy. I do think there are racial misconceptions about the Chinese workers. Not all Chinese work in sweatshops. But as they get better wages, the cycle continues—companies will go elsewhere as we see in Hong Kong.

JL: Could you speak about the role of the trade unions in the Northwest strike?

DM: While AMFA did not do everything right, they were an independent union and were treated miserably by the IAM-AFL-CIO. Roy and the mechanics were well aware that the moment the flight attendants opted not to support the strike, they had lost the battle. We do not get too much into in this film because we want it to be about unifying people. The AFL-CIO made it clear that they would not support the film, which is frustrating for me because this is not a film about AMFA, it's a film about workers and that is who the AFL-CIO is supposed to represent.

JL: You have made a film about globalization from the point of view of a worker.

DM: Yes, most films on the topic are made from the point of view of government and corporate leaders who have a definite agenda. It's always been my leaning as a filmmaker to tell stories with people who are actually living their lives and affected by these issues and not with people who have an agenda.

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