

A political trap for Chinese workers

John Chan
10 September 2011

A revealing commentary published in the British-based *Guardian* earlier this year highlights the political mechanisms being prepared in China to head off any upsurge in the working class against the Stalinist police-state regime in Beijing.

The author of article—“China’s main union is yet to earn its job”—was Han Dongfang who earned a reputation as a workers’ leader during the May-June 1989 protests that were brutally crushed in Beijing and other Chinese cities. He led the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation that sprang up as workers joined student protests for democratic rights and began to voice their own class demands.

Han is now the director of Hong Kong-based *China Labour Bulletin*. In his *Guardian* article, he advises the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to refashion the state-run All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) as a means to control the Chinese working class. Han even calls for assistance from “international unions,” which are notorious for selling out workers around the world, to educate the relatively inexperienced ACFTU.

Han warns the regime that it faces the danger of a social revolt: “As last year’s wave of strikes and the recent migrant worker riots in Guangdong clearly demonstrate, workers are angry. They are demanding better pay and working conditions and an end to the social injustice and discrimination they see around them every day. But with no real trade union that can articulate those demands, workers are left with little option but to take to the streets.”

Like the union leaders who betrayed recent protests by workers in Europe, Han insists that workers’ struggles must be apolitical—they must not challenge the government, but instead pressure it for concessions. At the height of last year’s strikes initiated by Honda auto workers, Han told the *Financial Times*: “I am trying my best to depoliticise the labour movement in China.”

In his *Guardian* article on June 26, Han promotes the fatal illusion that the CCP is “sometimes open to persuasion, especially on issues related to labour.” He continues: “Even the party, which in the past only had its own interests to consider,

now has to listen to the voice of the workers, and to respond to their increasingly clear and angry calls for change.”

Han’s appeals are directed toward the Stalinist regime and the corporate elite. Following the Shanghai trucker strikes in April that threatened to disrupt the world’s largest container port, Han wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that “unions are good for business in China.” Without an officially accepted union, truck drivers organised themselves via text messages and emails, creating “a big headache for the Shanghai government,” Han wrote. He hailed the success of collective bargaining at the Yantian dockyard, where “there has not been a crane drivers’ strike” since 2007.

As Han explains in the *Guardian*, however, the problem with the ACFTU is that it does not even pretend to represent workers. He criticises senior ACFTU official Guo Chen, who, ahead of wage negotiations, assured the Fortune 500 corporate giants operating in China that “unlike Western unions, which always stand against the employer, Chinese unions are obliged to boost the corporation’s development and maintain sound labour relations.”

Han’s solution is to learn from the experts in hoodwinking and betraying workers by allowing the ACFTU to join the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). “International trade unions,” he explains, “with their wealth of experience in genuine collective bargaining, can help the ACFTU better serve its members and eventually become a real trade union. In an increasingly globalised market, it is important that the world’s largest workforce has a voice in the international union movement.”

The ITUC general secretary is currently Sharan Burrow, the former president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), which has a record second to none in suppressing the struggles of workers and presiding over a massive assault on the jobs, conditions and living standards of the working class over the past 30 years.

Han’s political evolution demonstrates the bankruptcy of syndicalism, which confines workers to militant action for limited economic demands and is deeply hostile to any struggle

by the working class for power. These conceptions are the central thread linking his involvement in the 1989 protests to his current role as de-facto adviser to the Stalinist bureaucracy on the ACFTU—a police-state apparatus set up in 1949 to suppress the working class.

In 1989, Han was a 26-year-old railway electrician who, like many other workers in Beijing, was drawn toward the student protests in Tiananmen Square for democratic rights. In the midst of this political maelstrom, he became a leader of the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation that began to voice the demands of workers who were being hard hit by soaring inflation.

Han's organisation called for improved living standards and the right to form independent unions. Its rhetoric included radical-sounding slogans such as "Storm the Bastille of Stalinism," but politically it trailed behind the petty-bourgeois democrats in the student leadership, whose aim was to pressure the CCP's "reform" faction led by former general secretary Zhao Zhiyang for concessions. Taking fright at the appearance of the working class, the CCP rejected Zhao's proposals and sent tanks and troops into Tiananmen Square to crush the protests.

The political confusion that prevailed in the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation, which was improvised in the heat of the moment, was hardly surprising. But Han never drew the necessary conclusion that it was precisely the absence of a genuine revolutionary party with a worked-out socialist program that caused the mass movement to stall and allowed the Stalinist bureaucracy to go on the counteroffensive.

Instead Han concluded that the demands of his federation had been too radical and would have to be moderated in the future in order to not provoke the regime. Above all, what was impermissible was any political challenge by the working class to the Stalinist regime. As a result, he rapidly became an instrument for international corporate interests in China.

Jailed briefly for his role in 1989, Han was released and sent to the US for medical treatment—under pressure from the AFL-CIO union bureaucracy, the US government and Congress. Returning to Asia in 1993, he was barred from entering China and lived in exile in Hong Kong, where he set up the *China Labour Bulletin* and a radio talk show advocating class collaboration.

In the wake of the Tiananmen Square massacre, corporate investors recognised that the Beijing regime would stop at nothing to suppress working class unrest, and tens of billions of dollars flooded into China.

Significantly, the AFL-CIO in the United States awarded Han the George Meany Human Rights Award in 1993, recognising that he could prove to be a valuable asset in quelling any future revolt of the Chinese working class. Han has not disappointed his sponsors, now suggesting that international unions like the AFL-CIO should tutor China's state-run unions in the art of duplicity and sabotaging workers' struggles.

Chinese workers must begin to draw the necessary political conclusions. The root cause of their exploitation lies in the capitalist system presided over by the Stalinist bureaucracy on behalf of major Chinese and international corporations. The regime in Beijing has no more solution to the immense economic and social contradictions wracking Chinese capitalism than its counterparts in Europe and the US. The CCP will not hesitate to use repression against workers as it has many times before to defend the interests of the capitalist class.

In the midst of the strikes last year, some workers began to circulate Lenin's 1899 article "On Strikes," in which he explained to Russian workers that strikes against individual capitalists had to extend to the development of socialist political consciousness and the overthrow of the autocratic Tsarist regime.

More than a century has passed since Lenin's article. Led by Lenin's Bolshevik Party and guided by Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, the working class seized power in Russia in 1917 and established the world's first workers' state. The emergence of Stalinism as a result of the defeats of the working class and the isolation of the Soviet Union not only ultimately destroyed that first workers' state but was responsible, in the form of Maoism, for transforming China into the world's largest sweatshop.

The essential lessons drawn by Lenin as well as the struggle against Stalinism and Maoism are incorporated in the Fourth International founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938 and continued today by the International Committee of the Fourth International—the only genuinely revolutionary Marxist movement on the face of the planet. The development of socialist political consciousness by workers in China can only take place as part of the struggle to establish a Chinese section of the ICFI.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact