Foxconn stages union elections: A trap for Chinese workers

John Chan
13 February 2013

In a move that clearly indicates rising class tensions in China, the world's largest contract electronic manufacturer, Foxconn, has decided to hold trade union "elections" at its gigantic factories, which employ 1.2 million workers. The move—backed by the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime and the Western corporate giants that rely on sweatshops like those of Foxconn—is an attempt to avert a social explosion.

Foxconn has promised to conduct elections by July, after preparations that would include explaining to workers their supposed legal rights and on how to vote. The first election would be held in Foxconn's Shenzhen complex that houses 400,000 workers—the largest workplace on the planet.

The managed nature of the "election" is clear from official announcements. The Xinhua news agency described it as "more like a revamp of existing mechanisms than a landmark reform." Gu Cheng, an official of the state-controlled General Federation of Trade Unions in Shenzhen City (GFTUSC), said that Foxconn would be able to establish a "detailed" election process under the federation's instruction. "Every process, from candidate election and public notification to the final vote, has been clearly regulated subject to Chinese laws and regulations," he said.

Foxconn simply declared that union elections had been in place since 2008 and there was no fundamental change to the process. In that year, the "Foxconn Federation of Labour Unions" was created as the CCP regime sought to extend the policing role of its state-controlled unions into the private sector, which employs the vast majority of the country's workforce.

The only change, according to Xinhua, which obtained "exclusive" information from Foxconn, is that at least three frontline workers would be selected in each of the 12 manufacturing sections in the Shenzhen complex. Clearly, the purpose is to give the state-run union affiliates a facelift, designed to present them as representative of workers.

The official All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) controls all enterprise unions throughout the country. Chinese workers widely regard them as "scab" or "yellow unions"— similar to those operated by Chiang Kai-shek's regime before the 1949 revolution. That is because these agencies openly side with the employers and the CCP regime against the workers they supposedly represent. In Foxconn, as in other enterprises, senior company managers, often CCP branch secretaries, run the unions.

The bid to establish a more credible union mechanism to control restive Foxconn workers arose after Apple, the company's key client, became concerned about potential damage to its image through association with Foxconn's sweatshops which assemble iPads and iPhones. In 2010, the suicide of more than a dozen young employees exposed the military-barrack conditions inside Foxconn's huge factories. Last year, protests, strikes and riots broke out at Foxconn as it tried to meet production targets for Apple's iPhone 5.

The real role of the Foxconn union election was made absolutely clear by one of the premier mouthpieces of global finance capital, the London-based *Financial Times*, in an editorial on February 4 entitled: "Foxconn's unions: Free Vote will help preserve stability and party's power." The comment reads like an indictment of those who argue that the oppression of workers in countries like China can be alleviated through "independent" trade unions.

The *Financial Times* openly welcomed the Foxconn's union elections because "workers need a more effective voice on the factory floor if they are to

© World Socialist Web Site

be kept away from the street." In other words, what had to be avoided at all costs was the entry of Chinese workers onto the streets in a political movement that threatened the CCP regime on which global corporations depend to safeguard their profits.

The editorial reassured its readership that the changes would not undermine their interests by giving a voice to workers to press for improved wages and conditions. It bluntly declared: "Free elections are not about empowering workers. They are about releasing pressures that might spark an explosion of discontent that authorities could find difficult to contain."

Here we have, from the horse's mouth so to speak, the function of "independent" trade unions spelled out. Amid mounting signs of social unrest in China, under conditions of deepening global economic turmoil, union elections like the one at Foxconn are needed as a safety valve to defuse a dangerous political confrontation with the CCP regime.

Using almost the same words, this is precisely the perspective championed by exiled "labour leader" Han Dongfan and his Hong Kong-based *China Labour Bulletin*. Han, who once led workers' protests in the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement, before it was crushed by tanks, has been promoted by Western corporate circles and trade union bureaucracies, from the AFL-CIO in the US to the ACTU in Australia.

In 2010, when a Honda autoworkers' stoppage in southern China sparked a wave of strikes across the country, Han told the *Financial Times :* "I am trying my best to depoliticise the labour movement in China." In other words, the workers' movement must not mount a political challenge against the government and its capitalist policies, but must be steered into the dead end of appealing to the authorities for concessions.

In 2011, Han wrote a column in the British-based *Guardian*, explaining that his goal was to "reform" the state-controlled ACFTU affiliates into "real trade unions," so that Chinese workers would not be "left with little option but to take to the streets." In the same year, Han made an appeal to the US corporate elite, via a *Wall Street Journal* article, to recognise that unions in China would be "good for business".

Last December, *China Labour Bulletin* urged the CCP regime to act before labour unrest got out of control. Despite reprisals, arrests and dismissals, strikes had again surged. "As such, it is surely in the interests of the government and the business community to give the workers the tools they need to bargain effectively and thereby ensure stable labour relations," the *Bulletin* advised.

Foxconn, the CCP and the *Financial Times* have heard the message. By incorporating handfuls of "frontline" workers into the unions, workers are being trapped into supporting a mechanism that will enforce corporate demands for higher productivity and stricter discipline. Increasingly, China has to compete with other cheap labour platforms like Vietnam or India, as well as advanced capitalist countries, where workers' wages have been dramatically lowered since the onset of the global economic crisis in 2008.

Like workers around the world, Chinese workers cannot defend even their most basic rights through the trade unions. New forms of organisation, such as rank-and-file committees, are required to mobilise and unite the working class in a political struggle for power. Above all, the working class must build a revolutionary party to lead the fight to overthrow the CCP regime and establish a genuine workers' state in unity with the struggle for socialism by workers throughout Asia and the world. That is the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site