

Chinese Walmart workers engage in wildcat strikes

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A group of Walmart workers in China has embarked on a series of co-ordinated wildcat strikes across the country against oppressive new working conditions.

The strike began last Friday in a chain store in the southern city of Nanchang, in Jiangxi Province, against attempts by the company to impose a new system allowing managers to schedule an unlimited number of hours per day, totalling up to 174 hours per month (an average of just over 40 per week), with no overtime pay.

By Monday, the action spread to a second Nanchang store, as well as to others in Chengdu in the southwest, some 1,500 km away, and Harbin in China's northeast. The stores nevertheless remain open, with Walmart bringing in supplementary labour from other sites.

The strike has been organised by the Walmart Chinese Workers Association (WCWA), an unofficial union formed by several Walmart employees over the past two years. In a message of solidarity to Walmart workers in the United States, the WCWA published an open letter on its blog, declaring: "We have reason to believe that your conditions today will be ours tomorrow."

Walmart opened its first store in China in 1996 and now has 433 retail outlets around the country. In mid-May, it reportedly pressured workers to sign onto a new flexible working hours agreement. Already angered by years of collaboration between the company and the Chinese government-backed union, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), the workers responded with petitions and protests during the next six weeks, culminating in demonstrations inside Walmart stores.

Signs taped on workers' backs read: "Walmart workers rise up against deception, determined to defend rights." A striker at the Chengdu store carried a placard

reading: "We support Walmart workers in the US for the Fight for 15," in a reference to a campaign in the US for a minimum wage of \$15 per hour.

The WCWA has used the WeChat mobile messaging platform to communicate with and mobilise Walmart's workforce. While the majority of the 100,000-strong Walmart workforce has not, as yet, participated in the strike, more than 40 WCWA WeChat groups have sprung up. These have around 20,000 members, or 20 percent of Walmart's Chinese employees, despite continuing reported threats to staff from management.

The new scheduling means shifts could last as long as 11 or 12 hours a day, ending the regular 40-hour week for full-time workers. For the increasing number of part-time workers, the instability associated with "flexible hours" will make it difficult to maintain a second job. At the same time, the rapid rise in inflation over the past decade, which has seen real wages plummet, has left many employees earning little more than the local minimum wage, and no compensation for the added burden of irregular hours.

Up until now, strikes in China, while escalating in number, have been concentrated in individual workplaces and locations. The rapid spread of the Walmart strike, along with the determination of the workers to reach out to their national and international co-workers, highlights the increasingly explosive social tensions building up throughout the country as the economy stagnates and millions of workers face unemployment and desperate poverty.

Today's *Financial Times* commented: "The strike has realised the Communist party's fear of co-ordinated cross-country labour unrest just as China prepares to lay off millions of workers as a result of the industrial slowdown. The number of worker disputes in the country has soared in recent years, doubling from 2014

to reach 2,774 protests in 2015, according to China Labour Bulletin, a Hong Kong-based workers' rights organisation."

The FT quotes Anita Chan, professor of sociology at the Australian National University, who said: "It is unprecedented for workers to organise this way. Most strikes are in one workplace. This is different—Walmart has many stores in China and uses the same management methods in all the stores. So these workers understand everyone's situation: they are all the same."

These comments underscore the significance of the Walmart struggle and the growing restiveness throughout the country. In February, a week-long strike by several hundred stainless steel workers in Guangzhou, southern China closed a factory of 2,000 workers after the ACFTU agreed to significant reductions in workers' pay. Despite the fact that riot police were called in and the strike was declared illegal, the company eventually agreed to back off and abandon the new pay system.

In April, police in China's northeastern province of Heilongjiang arrested more than 30 mineworkers who had led large protests the previous month over unpaid wages, highlighting the Chinese Communist Party leadership's concerns over growing social unrest. Once again, the protests only ended when the company involved agreed to pay the miners two months' pay.

According to "Labor Notes" a US-based pro-trade union web site, the Walmart Chinese Workers Association has written an open letter to Walmart China and the ACFTU demanding that the company abandon the new scheduling system, stop interfering with union elections and end its harassment of elected union representatives. It also insists that the union representatives actually represent the workers' interests.

One of the Walmart workers, quoted on the site, said: "Since the union election last year, I communicated a lot with the ACFTU as a Walmart worker, explaining the situation to them. But it did not have much effect.

"ACFTU told me that the local unions should take the lead. But it is precisely because local unions are not helping us that we seek help from the ACFTU's national office. ACFTU always tells us it is investigating and considering, but [there is] no satisfactory outcome."

The worker's comments indicate the frustration and

anger of the Walmart workers with the company, and with the union that has served as its loyal agent. But while the political character of the WCWA leadership is not yet clear, the comments also point to the political dangers and challenges that confront, not only the Walmart workers, but the Chinese working class as a whole.

Neither the ACFTU nor the Chinese government can be pressured or reformed. As the Walmart workers themselves are beginning to recognise, the Chinese working class can advance only through the development of independent organs of struggle, in collaboration with its international counterparts—the workers in the US, across Asia, Europe and the world—in a political struggle against the entire CCP regime, which functions as a cheap labour enforcer for global capital.



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