



Amid Honda and Foxconn tragedies in China, a new era of worker activism

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After 30 years of reform and spectacular economic growth, the cracks are beginning to show.

The workers who have created China's economic miracle are tiring of being treated like cogs in a machine, working long hours in dangerous conditions for derisory pay. They are now saying enough is enough, staging strikes and protests across the country to demand not just their basic legal rights, but a better standard of living, better working conditions, and a better future.

Of course, strikes and worker protests are nothing new in China. In China's manufacturing heartland, the Pearl River Delta, for example, there are up to 10,000 labor disputes each year. Indeed, back in the spring of 2008, a high-ranking local union official described strikes as being "as natural as arguments between a husband and wife."

But what we are seeing now is an intensive phase of worker activism that reflects the rapid recovery of the Chinese economy and, more important, the failure of the government to tackle the fundamental issues that give rise to these disputes in the first place: low pay, the lack of any formal channels through which workers can voice their grievances and demands, and the continued exclusion of migrant workers from education, health care, and social services in the cities.

Ever since the Chinese government introduced a minimum wage in 2004, the majority of factory owners have used that legal minimum as the basic wage for their production-line workers. Of course, this would not be a problem if the minimum wage was a living wage, but in very many Chinese cities it is anything but. The minimum wage levels in three of China's most expensive cities - Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen - have just been increased to around 1,100 yuan per month (\$160), but this is still not nearly enough for even a basic lifestyle. As a Foxconn worker in Shenzhen told a local journalist after working overtime: "I can earn 1,500 yuan a month. But after rent, food, and clothing, I don't have a cent left."

Many factory workers have to put in more than 60 hours of overtime each month just to get by, performing the same robotic task for hours on end without a break and with no social interaction. No one can stand this mind-numbing and dehumanizing work 12 hours a day, six days a week. And this intensive factory system clearly has to change if the health and psychological well-being of China's young workers is to be protected.

But how can there be change when the workers have no formal outlet or channel for their demands and grievances? The trade union at these factories, if there is one, is hostage to management and will not take the side of the workers in a dispute. As such, workers have no option but to take matters into their own hands and stage strikes and protests in the hope that the local government, which abhors social instability, will intercede on their behalf. Tragically, some young workers at Foxconn, feeling alone and desperate and seeing no hope for the future, have taken their own lives.

Many of the workers at Honda are demanding a genuinely representative and democratically elected union to replace the sham union currently in place. And strange as it might seem, this could be the answer for management at Honda and Foxconn and other factories across China.

Such a union at Foxconn would not only be able to negotiate a decent basic wage that makes excessive overtime unnecessary, it could also foster a sense of community that would help protect the rights and dignity of all employees.

At Honda's supplier factories, a properly functioning trade union would have been able to present workers' demands for higher pay to management during scheduled, peaceful, and equal negotiations, and thereby forestall strike action that not only closed a components plant but shut down the company's entire China operation. Even the Communist Party boss of Guangdong now thinks proper trade unions are essential if workers' rights are to be protected. In a telephone conference to discuss the recent strikes in the province last week, Wang Yang stated that unions should stand up for workers in their struggle.

But it is not just the trade union that has to make changes.

After three decades of neglect, local governments have a crucial and long overdue adjustment to make. For decades now, city governments have been collecting billions of yuan in taxes from companies that employ workers from outside the city limits. And yet,

these migrant workers have received nothing in return from these local governments. They are excluded from housing, health care, and social services, and their children are excluded from local schools. And, until very recently, they could not even cash in their employer's social security contributions when they left the city to move back home.

Some urban governments have made grudging concessions to migrant workers, but most will only open their schools and hospitals to those with relatively well-paid and steady jobs. Those migrants who really need help are still systematically excluded. The time has come for city governments across China to repay the debt owed to the migrant workers who have generated their tax revenues for so long.

Local governments should build low-cost housing for workers, and migrants should be given the same rights to local social services as urban residents - no questions asked.

If migrants have access to affordable housing and no longer have to pay excessive charges for education, health care, and social services, then some of the intense burden created by low pay would be lifted and these young men and women who have been discriminated against their entire lives will finally begin to experience a sense of community and acceptance.

The final goal should be the eradication of the term "migrant worker" entirely. Workers are workers, no matter where they come from, and they should all be treated with dignity and respect, and at the very least get decent pay for decent work.

Han Dongfang has been an advocate for workers' rights in China for two decades. He first came to international prominence when, as a railway worker in Beijing, he helped set up the Beijing Autonomous Workers' Federation during the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. In 1994, he established China Labour Bulletin, a Hong Kong-based nongovernmental organization that seeks to uphold and defend the rights of workers across China.

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