



A small step forward but still a long way to go for trade unions in China

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It is probably the smallest trade union in the world, but the establishment of a two person union in a small privatized factory on the outskirts of Beijing last month still represents a step forward for China's workers.

The union was formally set up on 2 September by long-time labour activist, Liu Rongli. And even though Liu only managed to persuade one other employee to sign up, the local trade union federation still approved his application, after initially stating that the absolute minimum number of members it would accept was five.

Liu wrote in his blog, translated in full by [China Labor News Translations](#) , that an official at the Zhongcang Sub-district Federation in Tongzhou asked him: "This thing about you guys setting up a union, have you progressed to the election stage yet? The higher-ups place a lot of importance on this matter." When Liu explained that only one person had agreed to join the union, the official replied; "Let's do it this way. You go back and have a democratic election with two people. Elect an organizer. Then come and tell us and we will immediately approve it."

Liu did not know who the "higher-ups" were but the [Beijing Municipal Federation of Trade Unions](#) has been at forefront of a national union campaign since August this year to improve union organizing, encourage "democratic" elections of union officials and to push for collective wage negotiations. And this is probably where the pressure on Zhongcang was coming from.

While it is encouraging to see union federations approving enterprise unions established by worker activists rather than the using the traditional method of seeking management approval, the undue haste in which the process was completed in this case is troubling. There is little point approving an enterprise trade union unless the organizational ground work has been done properly, and the workers themselves actually want a union and are willing to actively support.

The reason so few workers were willing to join Liu's union was simple - management had gone out of its way to intimidate and even buy off anyone tempted to join. When Liu attempted to set up a union the previous year management promised a pay rise to those workers who refused to join. The pay rise actually only materialized nine months later and was just 100 yuan per month.

Under these circumstances, the local union federations should not simply lower the membership requirements, they should go into the factory and assure the workers that not only would they be protected from management reprisals if they joined the union, but that, once established, the union would spare no effort to fight for better pay and working conditions at the enterprise.

Unfortunately, the local union officials did none of these things. Indeed, one official in the Tongzhou District Federation confessed to Liu that they could not even get in the factory door and could exert next to no pressure on management.

Unless this traditional attitude of timidity and deference to factory bosses begins to change and union federations really stand up for workers' rights and interests, there is a real danger that the unions set up by activists like Liu will just be left to wither and die under constant pressure and harassment by management.

Still, the attitude of officials in Tongzhou is better than some in the coastal town of Quanzhou in Fujian. In April this year, CLB Director Han Dongfang talked to a worker at a [battery factory in Quanzhou](#) whose cousin had died of lead poisoning. The worker explained that the company refused to pay health insurance to its employees on the grounds that it already financed the enterprise union. When workers requested reimbursement for medical expenses, the company would say "if you have a problem, go over to the union to get some money."

Both the enterprise union and, seemingly, the local federation passively complied with the company's illegal and outrageous demands.

There are clearly some signs that China's trade unions are beginning to move in a more positive direction but, just as clearly, they have a very long way to go.

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