



Shenzhen Workers Strike Again

Wednesday, December 7, 2011

1,000 Workers Go on Strike at Hailiang Memory Equipment Company to Protest Loss of Seniority.

From 11 PM on December 4th, 1,000 workers at a hard drive factory in Shenzhen, Guangdong have been on strike. They are protesting the factory's decision to reset everyone's seniority to zero years after the factory was sold to another business. Workers have stated that they want the factory to provide compensation depending on each worker's previous length of service. Workers have raised banners on the square in front of the factory reading "We Also Know Our Rights" and "Japanese Companies Shamelessly Bully Chinese Workers," and have blockaded the factory gates.

The strike occurred at the Hailiang Memory Equipment Company's factory in the Great Wall Industrial Park, which is in Shenzhen's Nanshan Technological Development District. The factory is a subsidiary of Hitachi's computer memory division. This year, Hitachi decided to sell Hailiang to Western Digital and simultaneously reset the workers' seniority calculations, effectively making them all new hires. Levels of seniority have an influence on salary and compensation upon termination of workers' contracts. Needless to say, workers at the factory were dissatisfied with the handling of the sale and met to discuss going on strike to demand that management give them fair compensation for the reset of their seniority.

According to a worker who participated in the strike, there had already been tension between the factory management and their workers and the factory's sale was only a trigger. The base monthly salary for new workers is only \$228, which increases to \$260 after 6 months. In recent years, although the basic salary of the workers have been increased from even lower wages, management cancelled the transportation and meal allowance, extended the probationary period of worker contracts, limited the overtime hours each person could work and often withheld workers' overtime salaries. Therefore, workers' real income had not increased, making workers increasingly unhappy with the management.

This is not the first time that this dissatisfaction has led to the Hailiang workers taking action. In 2007, to protest the factory withholding overtime compensation, over 1,000 workers went on strike and assembled on Shennan Avenue, disrupting traffic. The crowd was eventually dispersed by more than 100 police officers.

As of press time, the strike is currently ongoing. The workers and the management are still negotiating with each other. Neither side has resorted to the use of force, and the factory has been providing food and water to the striking workers.

Executive Director of China Labor Watch Li Qiang believes that this strike, along with other recent labor unrest throughout China, reflects a problem in factories' relationships with their workers. Li points out that Chinese corporations and their foreign ownership rarely consult workers before making decisions. When there are strikes, corporations usually choose to pressure the local government to force workers to stop striking as soon as possible, rather than negotiate with the strikers. This kind of resolution does not solve the problems that caused the workers to strike and the resentment created by government action merely triggers more strikes and protests in the future.

Workers are currently more aware of their rights and how to protect them than they have been in the past. They have also learned how to organize themselves to take collective action. Li believes that the key to resolving the existing tension among workers, corporations and the government is for corporations and the government to listen to workers' demands, get a sense of what they need, and grant them the right to collectively bargain for redress. We call on corporations to bring their workers into the decision-making process. Chinese workers should be able to represent themselves in their factories.