

# The unrest and relative empowerment of the working class in contemporary China

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## **Abstract**

This paper puts forward three arguments regarding the nature and consequences of China's rising labor unrest. Firstly, China's rapid economic growth in the reform era was made possible by a large reserve army of labor, consisting mainly of semi-proletarianized migrant workers from the countryside. Secondly, the deepening proletarianization of and discrimination against migrant workers in recent years has led to a significant increase in labor movements. Finally, rising labor unrest has resulted in significant wage increases, the relative formalization of labor, and a significant decline in profitability.

*Key words:* China, informalization, migrant workers, proletarianization, labor unrest

## **1. Introduction**

Due to the “reform and opening up” of the Chinese economy after 1978, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become the “workshop of the world” (Gallagher, 2014; Chan and Selden, 2014; Pun and Chan, 2013). The supply of a large reserve of cheap labor power has attracted large amounts of foreign capital investment and has enabled China's rapid industrial growth during this era.<sup>1</sup> The existing social science literature refers to reform-era China as an exemplary case of a global “race to the bottom” in terms of workers' bargaining power vis-à-vis capital

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<sup>1</sup> Major foreign investors include Chinese diaspora capitalists (in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Southeast Asia), as well as the Western, Japanese and South Korean corporations.

(Pun, 2016: 30). Arguments concerning whether and to what extent this situation has changed (and to what extent Chinese workers have been empowered) are mixed. Some scholars suggest that China has become the “epicenter” of the world’s labor unrest and that the bargaining power of Chinese workers has significantly increased (Chan and Selden, 2014; Feng, 2017: 591; Silver and Zhang 2009). Others insist that there is no evidence supporting the claim of labor empowerment in China (Lee, 2016). This paper contributes to this debate by investigating the available quantitative data and secondary sources regarding the trajectory of labor unrest and workers’ rights in China. We argue that the unrest of the blue-collar migrant workers within the private sector has significantly increased since the 2000s. Despite the coercive attempts made by the Chinese state to contain it, rising labor unrest has resulted in labor empowerment manifested in significant improvements in wages and social rights of workers, as well as in the *relative* reformation of employment.

The data on labor unrest (visualized through a “Strike Map”) provided by the *China Labor Bulletin* website (CLB hereafter) constitutes our primary source for gauging the trends in China’s labor movements. CLB’s data provides information regarding the frequency, number of participants, and geographical distribution of labor protests taking place in China since the beginning of 2011 (CLB, n.d.). It also provides information regarding the resolution of each conflict – whether or not they are suppressed by security forces or have managed to win concessions (such as wage increases or improvements in certain rights) from employers or the state. CLB mainly collects data from the social media posts of the participants, supporters, and observers of local labor conflicts. It currently provides the only publicly accessible database which contains detailed information on the subject. We also use data on the trends of wages, size of formal and informal sectors, and profit rates (provided by the Chinese government agencies and academic literature) in order to gauge the extent of labor empowerment in China.

This paper consists of seven sections. The second section presents the theoretical basis for our arguments, the third section provides a brief historical background on the political economy of the Mao and post-Mao periods, the fourth section explains the temporal and spatial dynamics of labor unrest in China, the fifth section discusses the factors behind rising labor unrest, the sixth section discusses the evidence for and implications of labor empowerment in China, and the concluding section summarizes the main arguments of the paper.

## 2. Semi-proletarianization, capital mobility, and labor movements

In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx identifies “primitive accumulation” as the “starting point” of the capitalist mode of production ([1867] 1977: 507). This process of accumulation, he argues, occurs through the dissolution of the “economic

structure of feudal society” (Marx, 1977: 508), which entails the dispossession of peasants and their subsequent dependency on the labor market. Marx asserts that there is a significant peculiarity to the “law of population” in the capitalist mode of production. The capital accumulation, he argues, creates a “surplus population” called the “industrial reserve army” ([1867] 1977: 422-423). This reserve army of a disposable labor force facilitates the provision of cheap labor power in capitalist production. Deprived of other means of subsistence, wage-laborers are forced to settle for low-paying jobs.

On the other hand, Marx also stresses that the dispossession/proletarianization of the peasantry “assumes different aspects in different countries and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession as well as in different historical epochs” (Marx, [1867] 1977: 906). Taking Marx’s caveat into consideration, Karl Kautsky investigates different forms and paths of proletarianization. Kautsky ([1899] 1988) argues that the power of capitalist industry leads to the “the dissolution of peasant handicrafts,” slowly rendering the existence of a “self-sufficient peasantry” impossible. The rapid commodification of basic needs requires the peasantry to look for alternative income sources. Because the nature of agricultural production does not necessitate the “constant input of human labor-power,” argues Kautsky, peasants begin to work as wage laborers. This process of semi-proletarianization could be an advantage for the bourgeoisie. Workers’ remaining ties to small-scale farming reduces the cost of labor power reproduction and thereby keeps industrial wages relatively low (Kautsky, [1899] 1988: 14-15).

A huge reserve army of labor helps account for the rise of the Chinese economy and its ability to attract huge foreign investment in a very short period of time. Emerging in the aftermath of 1978, this reserve army of labor consisted of two main groups. The first group consisted of workers laid off from the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The second (and much larger) group was comprised of semi-proletarianized migrant workers (also called “peasant-workers” [*nongmin gong*]) who joined the urban proletariat in the early 1980s (Qi, 2018: 8-9). The number of migrant workers increased from 67.1 million in 1985 to over 100 million in 1993, over 150 million in 2000, over 200 million in 2005, 245 million in 2009 (Yang, 2012), and 285.5 million in 2017 (Guojia Tongji Ju, 2018).

As the making and subsequent unrest of the working class is a complex process interrelated with a variety of national and global factors, it cannot be discussed on a purely domestic basis. The creation of a semi-proletarianized labor force was a process that occurred in order to accommodate the emergence of an industrial bourgeoisie (comprising the native bourgeoisie and foreign capital) in China. In *Forces of Labor* (2003), Beverly Silver analyses the interrelation between “the structure of the capitalist economic development” and workers’ collective

action. Silver stresses that global trends of “hypermobility of productive capital” do not signify a mere “race to the bottom” within the market it enters. She conceptualizes these mobilizations as mere “spatial fixes” which only “reschedule crises.” Here, a “spatial fix” means that when capital uses the strategy of relocation in order to find a more “docile” labor force, it ultimately creates similar contradictions in the new production sites it enters, resulting in the emergence of labor militancy within the new location. Historically speaking, an increasing tide of labor unrest is observed wherever the productive capital relocates (Silver, 2003: 43). We argue that present-day China illustrates the dialectical and global process of capital relocation for cheap and docile labor, ultimately creating the conditions of its undoing.

In order to explain the persistence of and challenges to capitalist production relations, existing labor scholarship pays particular attention to the making and unmaking of capitalist hegemony over labor on the shop floor. In *Manufacturing Consent* (1982), Michael Burawoy conceptualizes the shop floor as an environment in which both consent and coercion are employed to compel workers to participate in their own exploitation. Burawoy also suggests that trade unions act as institutions “consolidating an internal state.” By enabling individuals to voice their grievances, trade unions help factory management contain potential labor unrest (1982: 109-122). However, the use of these methods can also reinforce the position of workers in the production process. Frances Fox Piven (2014: 24) conceptualizes this as “interdependent power,” that workers gain as a result of an increasing awareness of capital’s need for their consent in the maintenance of production. When the stakes are high for capitalists to generate profit within a limited amount of time, workers can utilize their organizational power on the shop floor in order to increase their bargaining power. Thus, in order to maintain production without the interruption of strikes or other types of labor action, capital must give certain concessions to workers.

### 3. Political economy of the Mao and post-Mao eras

An understanding of the Maoist legacy helps explain the specificities of class relations in contemporary China. Following a two-decade long war of national liberation against Japan that ended in 1945 and the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the Nationalist Party (*Guomindang*) in the civil war (1945-49), the People’s Republic of China was founded on October 1, 1949. The new regime first carried out land reform (1950-1952) and then collectivized the rural economy (1955-1958). It also adopted the household registration system (known as the *hukou* system) in the late 1950s. The *hukou* system divided the population into two groups: urban residents and rural residents. These groups comprised approximately 20% and 80% of the population, respectively, up until the

1980s. The system placed strong restrictions on rural to urban migration. Hence, villagers organized under rural collectives did not have much opportunity to change their residences and jobs. After allowing the existence of private industry owned by the native bourgeoisie (who did not side with the Japanese and the Guomindang), the PRC nationalized the entire urban industry between 1953 and 1956 (Meisner, 1999: 112). In the Mao era, the urban industry consisted of two types of enterprises: large-scale state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and small-scale enterprises managed by neighborhood cooperatives. Workers employed by the SOEs generally earned higher wages and accessed higher-quality social services than those working in the neighborhood cooperatives. However, urban industry as a whole provided full, life-long employment, as well as free healthcare and education, to urban residents (Andreas, 2016: 22-23; Gallagher et. al., 2011: 4). Until its abolition at the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) – the official trade union strictly controlled by the party-state– was the sole union representing urban workers (Hong and Warner, 1998: 5).

During the era of “reform and opening up” after 1978, the Chinese economy and society underwent fundamental transformations, gradually integrating with the world capitalist system (Andreas, 2016: 22-23; Chan et. al., 2016: 291; Gallagher et. al, 2011: 3-4). The most dramatic step taken to change class relations in post-socialist China was the reform of the urban industry. Beginning in the 1980s, SOEs were reorganized along increasingly capitalist lines. The autonomy of the management of SOEs was expanded, and profitability became the most important criterion for managerial performance. Similarly, performance criteria for workers were almost entirely defined by labor productivity, as opposed to the political credentials valued in the Mao era (Andreas, 2008: 127; Bramall, 2009: 413; Hung, 2013: 206). Life-long job guarantees for urban workers were abolished in 1994 (Ngok, 2008: 52). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, SOEs were either fully privatized or merged into “hybrid” enterprises, with the state embarking on joint ventures with private capital. During this brief period, approximately 50 million workers (40% of the SOE workforce) were laid off (Andreas, 2008: 131). The primary aim of these layoffs was to “increase efficiency by reducing employment” (Qi, 2018: 8). This process happened alongside the entry of international capital into the country (Chan et. al., 2010: 47). In 2015, the composition of urban employment according to ownership type in China was as follows: state-owned units (16.8%), collective-owned units (1.3%), private enterprises and individuals (51.2%), and other ownership units (30.7%). “Other ownership units” include the following categories: joint ownership, shareholding stock ownership, limited liability corporations, foreign and Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan Chinese fund or other ownership (MOHRSS, 2016). Although the Chinese government invests in “other ownership units,” it is clear that this category is closer to private enterprises

than SOEs. The share of the private sector (both Chinese and foreign) increased from nil in the late 1970s to over 50% of revenue and over 80% of (urban and rural) employment today (Chen, 2016: 315; Xinhua News Agency, 2018).<sup>2</sup>

The workers laid off from SOEs during the reform era have been forced to seek employment in the private sector. The ACFTU was rehabilitated in 1978 and has remained the only legal trade union in China, but due to privatization and closure of SOEs and the resulting layoffs, it lost an estimated 17 million members between 1997 and 2000. The close relationship between the state and capital in the reform era has enabled “many newly found enterprises [to] ignore official guidelines to establish unions” (Chan and Selden, 2016: 366).

The core characteristics of the party-state have also undergone significant changes. As Goodman (2016: 245) notes of the reform era, “the cadres have become embourgeoised and capitalists have been politicized.” In other words, the era witnessed the establishment of a strong relationship between the state and capital, a relationship which remains a decisive factor in accounting for the trajectory of labor movements in China.

In addition to economic liberalization, strict population control policies were implemented during the reform era (Bramall, 2009: 320). Urban couples were required to have no more than one child, and rural couples were allowed to have a maximum of two children. Labor supply was high during much of the reform era, but the population control policy contributed to the gradual tightening of labor supply (Rush, 2011: 29). For instance, official sources and surveys demonstrate that despite a 13% increase in formally employed migrant workers in 2004, there was still a shortage of almost one million workers in the Pearl River Delta (Chan and Zhai, 2013: 15).

Through the relaxation of the *hukou* system, the Chinese government allowed peasants to migrate to urban areas for work. In line with Kautsky’s (1988) conceptualization, the partial dispossession of the peasantry “perpetuate[d] the extraordinarily low wages and low reproductive costs of the massive Chinese migratory labor force during the last two decades of the twentieth century” (Chan, 2018: 110). The first generation of rural migrants were under pressure to compete against the older generation of urban laborers (previously employed by SOEs). In other words, the *hukou* system “was seriously manipulated by capital and local state to create exploitative mechanisms of labor appropriation in the increasingly competitive world” (Pun, 2016: 79). The place of rural migrant workers within

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<sup>2</sup> However, it should also be stressed that China’s ability to attract greater foreign investment (compared to other countries of the Global South) was largely a result of the pre-reform legacies of a relatively healthy, educated, and skilled labor force, as well as a fairly developed hard infrastructure and industry based primarily on the agricultural surplus squeezed from the rural collectives (Arrighi, 2007: 351; Bramall, 2009: 315-320; Bramall, 2000: 459-471).

urban industries was defined as transient rather than permanent (Pun and Lu, 2010: 503-509). However, because the low wages they earned were significantly higher than their earnings from small-scale farming, earlier generations of migrant workers enthusiastically accepted temporary and low-wage factory jobs (Pun, 2005).<sup>3</sup> The workings of this system reinforced the idea that the party-state (in conjunction with its primary goal of seeking the interest of private capital) necessitated the labor power of migrant workers in urban industries but did little to accommodate and integrate them into the urban lifestyle (Pun, 2016: 78-82).

The characteristics of migrant laborers have changed significantly over the last two decades (Chan, 2017; Pun, 2016; Pun and Lu, 2010). The first generation of migrant workers did not aim to settle in the cities. After working in factories for a decade or two and acquiring savings, workers were returning to their villages. A significant portion of migrant workers' reproduction costs (such as food and childcare) were provided by their parents, who remained in the villages, farming household plots and caring for their grandchildren. Hence, migrant workers' strong rural ties made possible the persistence of the supply of cheap and informalized labor power, resulting in a significant amount of capital accumulation.

The new generation of migrant workers employed in coastal factories since the late 1990s and early 2000s is radically different from earlier generations. Unlike their parents, they do not have significant ties to (or experience with) farming. Rural areas, therefore, have gradually lost their capacity to cover the reproduction costs of migrant generations. Young workers also prefer to settle in cities and have higher consumption standards. Moreover, recent *hukou* reforms have facilitated the transfer of rural lands from the hands of peasants to agrarian capital (Andreas and Zhan, 2016: 799-800). The increasing separation of migrant workers from farmland and agricultural income sources considerably increases the living costs of migrant workers (Lee, 2019: 148). The deepening proletarianization and urbanization has changed the new migrant worker generations' disposition toward class struggle. Young migrant workers are more prone to engage in "spontaneous collective actions in the workplace" in order to improve their income and social standing (Pun and Lu, 2010). While the single-party regime's strong repressive apparatuses and lack of freedom of expression and organization (other than the existence of the official trade union controlled by the party state) significantly constrain the labor

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<sup>3</sup> There are also additional processes at work. For example, according to Pun (2005) and Chan & Selden (2014: 600-601), the prospect of seeking a job in urban factories became enticing for women born in rural settings. Pun (2005) discusses a complex process in which young female migrant workers view the transitory period spent as urban workers as their only chance of "self-actualization," as well as an opportunity to experience the urban lifestyle. Thus, the increasing desire for urban life emerged as an additional *pull factor* for urban employment, which ironically created a process whereby the workers – who had high hopes of experiencing life in the big cities – were working in highly spatially-segregated environments where they had little to no contact with the urban lifestyle.

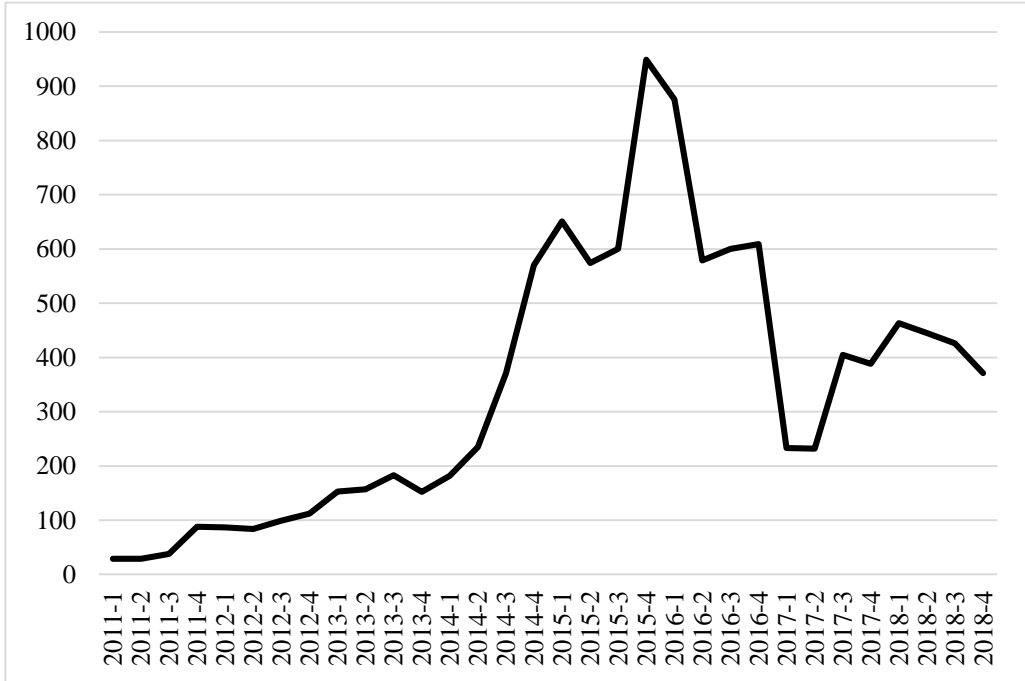
movement, the tide of labor unrest (in the form of extra-legal strikes, sit-ins, and protests) has nevertheless resulted in the relative reformation of labor, higher wages, and increasing social rights for the Chinese proletariat. This is not to say that this empowerment has been a straightforward process. On the contrary, the relative empowerment of migrant labor in China was also met with counter-measures from the capital and the state. These included the creation of new precarious positions both within enterprises and in the Chinese labor market, the relocation of capital from coastal regions to inland regions, the state's revival of the ACFTU to monopolize worker representation, and the state-led crackdown of labor NGOs. However, the increasing number of labor strikes in inland regions (facilitated by the relocation of capital to these regions) and the aforementioned concessions given to workers demonstrate the unsustainability of these fixes.

#### 4. Temporal and spatial trends of labor unrest in China

Labor unrest makes up more than 40% of all instances of social unrest in contemporary China. Among the four groups of participants of social unrest identified by Göbel (2017: 6-8), "migrant workers" are by far the most frequent participants, demonstrating their significance in understanding and analyzing social movements in China.



**Figure 1**  
The Number of Strikes in China (2011-2018)



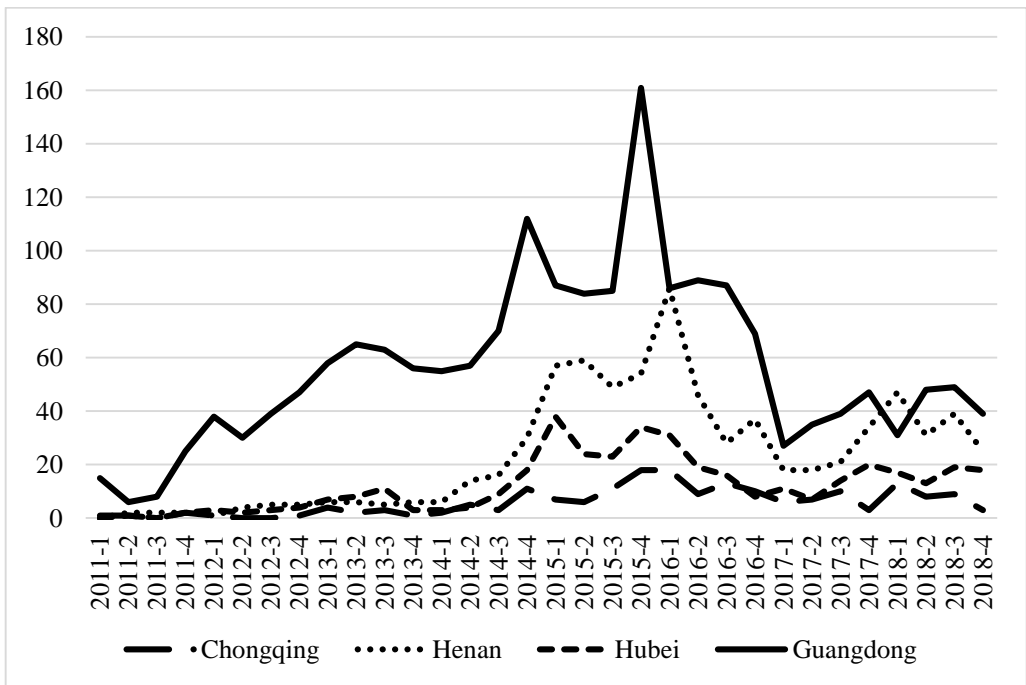
Source: China Labor Bulletin, n.d., <https://maps.clb.org.hk/strikes/en>

Since 2011, the number of labor strikes in China has grown at an unprecedented speed. Figure 1 shows the trajectory of documented strike activity in China from the beginning of 2011 to the end of 2018. In order to include the most recent strikes, each year is divided into four quarters. The year 2011 indicates a total of 184 instances of documented strikes, with the number more than doubling each ensuing year. With a total of 2,774 documented strikes, the number reaches its peak in 2015. Although the number of strikes in 2016 and 2017 dropped to 2,664 and 1,258, respectively, the year 2018 demonstrates a relative increase in strike activity. There were 1,705 documented strikes in 2018, corresponding to a monthly average of 142,08 strikes (the average was 104,83 in 2017). The bulk of the strikes occur in construction and manufacturing, with the two sectors accounting for over 60% of the total number of strikes. The data also shows that 63.4% of all reported labor disputes between January 2011 and December 2018 occurred in private enterprises (including foreign-owned, Hong-Kong, Macau and Taiwan-owned, and joint

capital enterprises) and 11.6% of disputes occurred in state-owned enterprises.<sup>4</sup> Considering the composition of urban employment according to enterprise ownership, the CLB’s labor unrest data does *not* seem to reflect any significant bias towards the private or public sector. Although the causes of each strike are not specified, reported instances indicate that wage disputes are the most common reason for strike activity.

**Figure 2**

The Quarterly Change in Strike Activity in Chongqing Municipality and Henan, Hubei and Guangdong Provinces (2011-2018)



Source: China Labor Bulletin, n.d., <https://maps.clb.org.hk/strikes/en>

In terms of geographical distribution, the majority of strikes still occur in the Pearl River Delta (also called the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Bay Area), where the majority of “hybrid” and foreign-owned enterprises are located (CLB, n.d.). A

<sup>4</sup> Enterprise type is unknown in 21.8% of the reported strikes reported by the CLB. The high ratio of unknown enterprise type is one of the most serious limitations of the CLB’s data.

closer look at available evidence, however, suggests a possible change in this trend. As labor militancy in the Pearl River Delta has resulted in increased wages and improved social rights for workers, capital has been relocating to inland provinces. As Chan (2018a: 182) notes, “a substantial workforce is now being recruited within the inland regions,” and many rural migrant workers are forced to return to their “home provinces” for work. Thus, Guangdong province has lost almost half a million of its formal workforce in manufacturing between 2014 and 2016 and this has been matched by increasing industrialization in interior and western regions like Henan and Chongqing (Xu and Chen, 2019: 1-2). One of the most prominent examples of this is the relocation of a bulk of Foxconn’s production sites to Wuhan city in Hubei province.<sup>5</sup> Such relocations of production sites to inland regions are becoming increasingly common. Therefore, we need to assess the effect of these “spatial fixes” on labor strikes within the relocation regions. Figure 2 shows the increase in labor disputes in Chongqing municipality and Henan and Hubei provinces, as well as how they compare to that of Guangdong province. Beginning with the last quarter of 2014, the graph demonstrates increased strike activity in coastal regions, with the number of strikes in Henan briefly surpassing Guangdong in the first quarter of 2018. This spatial trend points to an interesting prospect for the future of the labor movement in China.

Sectoral trends are also worthy of attention. Silver (2003: 65) noted that China was seen as a “low wage site for rapid extension” of the auto industry in the late 1990s and early 2000s and predicted that “if past dynamics are a guide to future trends, then we have good reasons to expect the emergence of strong, independent autoworkers’ movement in [...] China in the coming decade.” This prediction turned out to be right. The 2010 Honda strikes are perceived as an important milestone for contemporary workers’ movements in China. Not only did these series of strikes result in a 35% increase in workers’ wages, they also initiated a series of strikes in other factories (Zhang, 2015: 3-10). The frequency of reported strikes within this sector, as well as the overall frequency of strikes within the manufacturing sector in general, supports Silver’s argument that the relocation of capital to different regions cannot permanently “fix” labor militancy: it merely shifts strike activity geographically (Chan, 2018; Chan and Selden, 2014; *China Labor Bulletin*, 2018). The manufacturing sector nevertheless continues to move its production sites to inner regions, evidenced by an increase in number of 260,000 formal manufacturing jobs in Henan province between 2014 and 2016 (Xu and Chen, 2019: 1-2).

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<sup>5</sup> Foxconn is a Taiwanese-owned electronics company holding more than 50% of the market share in global electronics manufacturing (Chan et. al., 2016).

## 5. Economic, political, and demographic factors

The nature of Chinese labor movements has changed significantly over the last two decades. According to Lee (2007), China has witnessed two types of labor activism in the reform era. One is the “protests of desperation” displayed by the laid-off “rustbelt” workers of China’s Liaoning province (the heart of SOEs in the Mao era) during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The actors in these protests were more prone to engage in spontaneous strike activities because their claims rested on “moral and legal ground[s]” rooted in the socialist labor contract. The second type of labor activism comprises migrant workers’ movements in the “sunbelt” (those working in privately-owned enterprises in the Pearl River Delta). This group has no experience with the socialist labor contract. They frequently experience discrimination due to their rural resident status, are often not paid regular wages, and suffer under poor working conditions (Lee, 2007: 9-13). Migrant workers have “resort[ed] first to legal activism” before taking strike action. In her conceptualization of different forms of labor activism, Lee (2007) deems these types of unrest to be “cellular,” meaning that if a unified representation of the workforce is not formed, these strikes are bound to be isolated instances, posing no real threat to central authority. However, we agree with Pun and Lu (2010: 495, 503-509) that migrant workers have experienced significant generational change. While the older generation (those who worked in urban industries in the 1980s and 1990s) limited their grievances to minor and less direct forms of resistance, the second generation (those working in urban industries in the 2000s and 2010s) has come to associate their grievances with their working conditions and have been more prone to confront their employers by taking direct action, including strikes. Increase in and persistence of “cellular” strike activities in the face of the state’s serious containment efforts has significant consequences for relations between the state, capital, and labor.

A thorough analysis of labor unrest in the sunbelt region should also take into account the organization of factory life. Many migrant workers live in dormitories, where they have little or no contact with the outside world. Despite managerial efforts to counteract solidarity among the workers,<sup>6</sup> these dormitories usually function as sites of organization and mobilization (Pun and Lu, 2010: 509). The “dormitory labor system” also reinforces the sense of alienation that workers feel towards the urban population, since the “(myth) of upward mobility,” along with the prospect of “urban consumption,” is one of the main “pull factors” for the rural

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<sup>6</sup> Chan et al. (2010: 210) discuss how big factories often consciously set up rooms specifically so that each inhabitant works in different departments and on different shifts, thus making it difficult to socialize.

population. Migrant workers also experience spatial segregation from the urban residents, as well as discriminatory treatment by urban officials (Chan, 2018a: 170).

The impact of factory relocations from coastal to inland provinces is also worthy of attention, as such relocations play an important role in counteracting spatial segregation and in paving the way for the future of labor militancy. Various sources have documented that these relocations have prevented large-scale labor movements from emerging over the past few years, especially large-scale strikes (Chen and Gallagher, 2018; Xu and Chen, 2019). Xu and Chen (2019: 1) point out that since 2014, the share of labor compensation in the national product has been growing more slowly. However, the increase in the number of extra-legal activities in the interior regions give us reason to expect a new wave of labor unrest in these regions. Based on the 2013 Chinese General Social Survey, Lin (2019: 12) argues that, when compared with workers in Shenzhen (a highly industrialized coastal megacity), workers from Chongqing demonstrate more willingness to use collective action to resolve their grievances. According to Chan (2018a: 182), employment in factories situated close to workers' villages may make it easier for them to "draw on local social networks for support [...] not only for daily life but perhaps also in renewed struggles for fairness and justice." Moreover, the relative weakness of local public administration in these provinces significantly improves the workers' "political position" (Xu and Chen, 2019: 3). The increase in the number of strikes in Chongqing, Henan, and Hubei supports this argument.

Labor movements – including spontaneous actions – are not isolated instances. Because strikes are extra-legal activities which the Chinese state often attempts to repress, one must consider the specific circumstances that make this form of mobilization possible. According to Elfstrom and Kuruvilla (2014: 457), China's labor unrest in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century demonstrates a growing shift from "defensive" to "offensive" action. One reason for this shift is the significant decline of fertility rates caused by the reform era's population control policies.<sup>7</sup> The decline in population has tightened labor supply and discouraged competition among workers. In addition, the deepening proletarianization and urbanization of second-generation migrant workers have made them more combative.

In his comprehensive analysis of social unrest in China, Göbel (2017) notes that despite being the most common type of social unrest, strikes are rarely met with state repression. He believes that the Chinese state's relative tolerance towards migrant workers may result from their numerical strength and capacity (both potential and actual) for mobilization. The fact that over 280 million migrant

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<sup>7</sup> The problematic nature of this policy in terms of the decrease in the reserve army of labor becomes more evident when the 2015 alteration to the policy (whereby families were allowed "two children") is considered (Bloomberg 2019).

workers are currently employed in urban areas poses a tangible potential threat to the Chinese state (Göbel, 2017: 22). Although migrant workers' actions are usually local, their demands are growing larger, even bordering on the "offensive." Unlike the laid-off SOE workers, who demand rights they have already lost, migrant workers have begun demanding new rights, such as higher wages and greater social protection (Elfstrom and Kuruvilla, 2014).

Contrary to the orthodox belief of absolute repression, Yao Li (2017: 22) examines how protests in authoritarian regimes may take the shape of a "non-zero-sum-game," whereby the state allows certain spaces within society for social unrest. In this manner, protestors refrain from engaging in more disruptive activities and remain within the boundaries set up for them, perhaps even making use of such boundaries for relative gains. The Chinese state shapes its labor laws, welfare programs and related policies in order to contain social unrest (Huang, 2013).<sup>8</sup>

Increased pressure on the capital and state for improved labor rights can also entail the creation and exploitation of fragile laboring groups. The proliferation of using "intern labor" as a substitute for formal labor is a key issue (Chan, 2017). Student workers constitute a peculiar place within the labor market, since, despite performing similar jobs in formal labor, they "are not legally defined as employees under Chinese law" (Chan et. al., 2015: 4). The deepening integration of interns within the production process is facilitated by an unchecked increase in local vocational schools (Chan and Zhai, 2013: 20). Poorly-paid student interns, for example, made up about 70% of the workers during the 2010 strike in Honda factory in Guangdong (Chan and Zhai, 2013: 20). It has also been documented that Foxconn, with the support of the local governments, pressures vocational school students to work in its factories. Currently, students make up about 15-50% of the workforce in Honda and Foxconn factories (Lee, 2019: 142). This exploitation of intern labor is reminiscent of the "agency workers" who emerged in the late 1990s to counteract the wave of unemployment after the restructuring of SOEs (Lee, 2019: 144). Although agency and dispatch workers' rights were eventually regulated by the 2008 Labor Contract Law, the "flexible employment" system created a "dual labor regime" which weakened the bargaining power of both formal and informal labor forces (Friedman and Lee, 2010: 513). Thus, capital has responded to increased labor unrest by creating additional precarious jobs.

The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (the trade union arm of the party-state) has remained weak during the reform era. In recent years, the Chinese government has established more regulations for the organization of the ACFTU in private industries. Union membership has reached over 258 million, making the

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<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the effects of welfare provision on political containment, see: Fox-Piven and Cloward, 1993.

Chinese proletariat the “largest unionized workforce in the world” (Chan and Selden, 2014: 611). In line with Burawoy’s contention that trade unions consolidate an “internal state” on the shopfloor (1982: 109-122), the Chinese state’s attempts to reinvigorate the ACFTU is a testament to its desire to contain rising labor unrest (Friedman and Lee, 2010). Such efforts are closely related to the trajectory of non-governmental organizations working in the field of labor rights (known as “labor NGOs”), which, beginning from the early 2000s, have attracted increased interest from workers. Workers’ interest in labor NGOs began after the ACFTU suddenly lost a large portion of its members, an indication that workers were beginning to seek independent representation from new organizations. Under Hu Jintao’s leadership, the Chinese state made some concessions for the existence of labor NGOs insofar as they remained “service-type organizations” that limit their activities to community development, outreach programs, and occasional individual legal consultancy (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018: 2-3). During this era, the party-state used forceful strategies of repression if they felt that NGOs were becoming overtly politicized. Although the state has allowed only very limited space for their activities, labor NGOs have attracted significant sympathy and support among workers, especially in Guangdong. State repression of labor NGOs has intensified since the beginning of Xi Jinping’s rule in 2013 (Friedman and Kuruvilla, 2015; Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018). This has occurred in conjunction with the administration’s efforts to revive the ACFTU, resulting in a dual process demonstrating the state’s attempt to keep labor mobilizations at bay.

Chen and Gallagher (2018: 2-3) conceptualize a twofold process of implementing a “political fix” in labor mobilizations. First, legal procedures are constructed in a way that atomizes and prevents workers from embarking upon collective lawsuits (a *procedural fix*). Second, the party-state reestablishes the ACFTU as an organization which monopolizes the representation of workers’ rights, thus regulating and dissolving workers’ claims (a *representational fix*). They further argue that the ACFTU attempts to take on cases from labor NGOs and veer labor towards the legal system. On the other hand, the recent strengthening of the ACFTU has not prevented labor empowerment. Based on a survey of 1,268 firms located in 12 Chinese cities, one study found that the presence of an ACFTU branch in an enterprise increases the probability that workers may be offered individual and collective contracts, thereby resulting in higher wages, more substantial pension coverage, and other welfare indicators (Yao and Zhong, 2013; also see Chan et al. 2017). For instance, the strike wave in the auto industry in Guangdong in 2010 forced the ACFTU to allow relatively democratic union elections at the factory level. The more effective representation of workers by democratically elected enterprise union leaders succeeded in extracting concessions from the capital in auto factories of Guangdong (Zhang and Yang, 2019: 13-20).

Furthermore, while the state's "political fix" has restrained the emergence of a broadly-based labor movement, the current "feedback mechanism" whereby the ACFTU directs collective grievances to an atomized legal procedure contributes to the frustrations of workers. Both the inadequacy of the legal system in addressing injustices inherent to the Chinese political economy and the resulting worker frustration lead workers to continuously use extra-legal methods to voice their grievances (Chen and Gallagher 2018; Elfstrom and Kuruvilla 2014).

## 6. Labor empowerment and its manifestations

State provision to lessen widespread social discontent is becoming common practice in contemporary China. Beginning from the mid-2000s, the Chinese central government has made several minimum wage and social insurance reforms to maintain social stability (Chan, 2018: 108). Because the local authorities deployed "selective paternalism" in the enforcement of these reforms, however, these reforms have not entirely solved workers' grievances (Shi and Ni, 2017). The 2008 Labor Contract Law, for example, initiated an important set of provisions for workers' rights. Most importantly, the law regulated workers' contracts and ensured compensation for fired workers (Gallagher et. al., 2015: 198-199). Evidence suggests that this law greatly contributed to workers' consciousness of their rights (Gallagher et. al., 2015: 226-227). However, along with the Employment Promotion and Labor Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Laws of 2007, the Labor Contract Law focused on "individual-rights based legal responses to growing labor unrest in the country," whereby the state attempted to counteract the growing consciousness of *collective* legal rights by targeting standalone workers' rights cases (Chan and Hui, 2013: 237), thus reinforcing their policy of selective paternalism (Shi and Ni, 2017; Gallagher et. al., 2015). The government's effort to contain labor unrest through these laws has not achieved much success (Remington and Cui, 2015).

In her study of the methods of counteracting rising labor unrest, Gallagher (2014: 12) argues that Chinese officials frequently use their "discretionary power" to maintain workplace harmony. According to Gallagher (2014: 3), this new approach to conflict resolution may stem from the Chinese party-state's reluctance towards "the institutionalization of social conflict [since] it heightens the possibility of social empowerment." As of 2012, "mediated" labor disputes accounted for 58% of all disputes/cases, outnumbering cases resolved through formal arbitration (Gallagher, 2014: 10).

Rapid wage increase has been the most important outcome and indicator of relative labor empowerment in China. Between 1997 and 2007, the average real wage more than tripled (Yang et. al., 2010: 482). Between 1992 and 2002, the average real wage for unskilled labor increased by 135% (Ge and Yang, 2014: 1). China's average unit labor cost in manufacturing relative to the United States

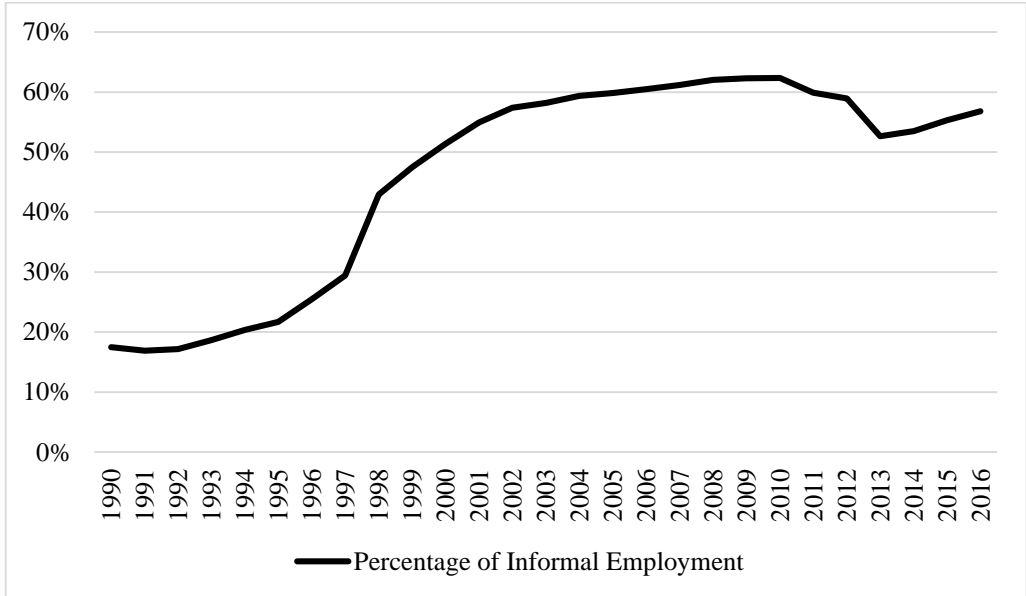


increased from 37% in 1995 to 46% in 2014 (Suwandi et al 2019, 15). The role of labor strikes and collective bargaining in increasing wages has been well-documented by the literature (see Cheng et. al., 2013; Elfstrom and Kuruvilla, 2014; Chan et. al., 2016; and Chan and Selden 2014).

Some scholars neglect the role of labor empowerment in rising wages in China. For instance, C.K. Lee (2016: 319) claims that Chinese labor has not gained much power and the rapid rise in workers' wages is "part of the Chinese government's strategy to rebalance the Chinese economy" by increasing mass consumption. Also, some studies attempt to incorporate both labor unrest and economic rebalancing into the explanatory framework. For example, Lee et al. (2016: 233) acknowledge that "new generation of Chinese workers is taking increasingly bold collective action" but still insist on attributing significant role to the Chinese government's pursuit of increasing mass consumption: "[ACFTU] draws on state power to improve wages and conditions of employment. Lying behind this are both the government's macroeconomic objectives of reducing inequality and boosting consumption, and its political objective of creating a harmonious society."

These arguments miss the logic of industrial capital accumulation in China. Despite strenuous efforts to upgrade the quality of manufacturing, the majority of Chinese industries have very limited profit margins, which necessitates low labor costs. As Qi (2018: 11) notes, declining profitability is the main reason behind China's economic slowdown after 2008 and "profits are likely to be squeezed by the raising wages" (2018: 12). In fact, after fluctuating between 31% and 33% in 2000-2010, China's profit share fell to 24.2% in 2015. This decline was "matched and driven by the labor share increase" (Li, 2017: 399-400). The annual average of the national growth rate of wages in Chinese urban sectors was 29.15% between 2000 and 2010. Despite the decline in profitability, the average annual growth rate of urban wages grew at a pace of 13.95% between 2010 and 2015 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2017). In short, the increasing bargaining power of Chinese workers has placed upward pressure on wages and downward pressure on profit rates. Moreover, as Chan and Selden (2014: 605) note, "increasing wages among workers are not translating rapidly into higher consumption." If increasing minimum wage was the state's strategic plan to reinforce workers' roles as "consumers", then one may expect that this plan would be an institutionalized, all-encompassing one, rather than an outcome reached only after a sufficiently long period of labor unrest. Thus, even though a phenomenon like wage increase should not be blindly accepted as a sign of complete empowerment, it does demonstrate a significant concession on the part of the capital and state in response to rising labor unrest.

**Figure 3**  
The Percentage of Informal Employment in Urban China (1990-2016)<sup>9</sup>



Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2018, <http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/>

Finally, although increasingly precarious forms of employment have emerged (such as student internships, “rush-order” workshops, street vendors, and domestic workers) (Lee, 2019: 142-144), the persistent struggles of migrant workers have resulted in the relative reformation of labor. Figure 3 shows that the informal sector’s share in urban employment increased from 17.4% in 1990 to 62.4% in 2010, before dropping to 56.8% in 2016. Neither Chen and Xu (2017) nor Li (2017) investigate specific reasons for this relative reformation; however, they do discuss the implications of this process in detail. A decline in the informal economy indicates a decrease in the “reserve army of labor.” An “endogenous” characteristic of the capitalist mode of production, the reserve army consists of the semi-

<sup>9</sup> Since there is no official data on informal employment in China, the framework presented by Chen and Xu (2017) was used in calculating an *estimation* of informality in urban areas. According to this framework, “urban private enterprises,” “self-employment,” and “unregistered urban formal employees” were counted as making up the urban informal economy. The latter group is calculated based on the “discrepancy between total urban employment and the aggregation of total formal employment, urban private enterprises and urban self-employment” (Chen and Xu, 2017: 428-498). Li provides data on the period between 1995 and 2014. We have expanded the temporal scope of Li’s analysis by looking at the period between 1990 and 2016.

employed and unemployed populations, and, because these populations are aware that those willing to work for less can easily replace them, they systematically inhibit the bargaining power of laborers (Marx, [1867] 1977: 426-432). Thus, the relative reformation of employment reveals a decrease in the reserve army of labor and an increase in the bargaining power of workers. Although the coercive, legal, and representational efforts of the state (in conjunction with the “spatial fix” of capital to interior and western regions) have somewhat decreased the pace of this empowerment, the increase in protest activity in 2018 demonstrates the unsustainability of this trend in the near future.

## 7. Conclusion

The privatization, deregulation, and informalization of the Chinese economy during the reform era has created a reserve army of labor consisting of urban workers laid off from state-owned enterprises and semi-proletarianized migrant workers from the countryside. Currently consisting of over 280 million people, migrant workers have become the largest section of the Chinese working class. Chinese and international capital profited significantly from the exploitation of this labor force in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the rise of labor unrest during the last two decades has partly changed this situation. Causes for the increase in labor strikes and protests include the deepening of the proletarianization and urbanization of blue-collar migrant workers, increasing worker needs and consumption standards, daily discrimination, and the rigidity of the daily realities of the shop floor.

Although labor unrest generally consists of local mobilizations and has so far failed to generate a national labor movement with an anti-capitalist political orientation represented by an independent trade union confederation, it has nevertheless posed a strong challenge to capital in China. Rising labor unrest has led to significant wage increases and, more importantly, the relative – albeit still quite limited – reformation of labor in recent years. In short, China is no longer a country with large reserves of a cheap, informalized, and docile labor force.

The rapid rise of labor NGOs in coastal provinces like Guangdong demonstrates the Chinese workers’ need to organize independently from the ACFTU, the official trade union. The recent crackdown on labor NGOs illustrates the limits of state toleration of independent labor organization. In response to rising labor activism, the Chinese government has also abandoned its previous policy of neglecting the ACFTU and has recently pushed to strengthen it in private industries. Although the ACFTU is dependent on the government, its organizational strengthening has nevertheless brought higher wages and stronger social protection to workers and has therefore become another manifestation of the relative empowerment of the Chinese proletariat.

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## Özet

### Günümüz Çin’inde işçi sınıfının eylemleri ve nispi güçlenişi

Bu makale Çin’de yükselen işçi eylemleri ve sonuçları hakkında üç temel argüman ileri sürüyor. Birincisi, Çin’in reform dönemindeki hızlı ekonomik büyümesi ağırlıklı kırlardan gelen yarı-proleter nitelikteki göçmen işçilerden oluşan yedek işgücü ordusu sayesinde gerçekleşmiştir. İkincisi, göçmen işçilerin derinleşen proleterleşmesi ve şehirlerde maruz kaldıkları ayrımcı uygulamalar işçi hareketinin son yıllarda ciddi yükselişine sebep olmuştur. Son olarak, işçi hareketinin yükselişi ciddi ücret artışlarına, işgücünün nispeten formelleşmesine ve kâr oranında ciddi düşüşe neden olmuştur.

*Anahtar kelimeler:* Çin, enformelleşme, göçmen işçiler, proleterleşme, işçi eylemleri



