

# Taking matters into their own hands

**What happens when official trade unions are working for the state, not the workers? TIM PRINGLE considers labour rights in 'post-socialist' China, Russia and Vietnam.**

**In the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou,** on the evening of 3 December 2015, police began rounding up labour NGO staff and worker representatives. Though such police action is not unprecedented, the degree of coordination was unexpected. Some suggested that orders for the crackdown had come directly from central government agencies in Beijing. In total, 23 people were questioned and five key labour activists charged with 'gathering crowds in a public place' or 'embezzlement'. Two of them, Zeng Feyang and Meng Han, remain in detention without regular access to lawyers.

The crackdown has been interpreted as a warning to labour activists and NGOs to stop building transnational support networks, or accepting funding from foreign organizations. It also appears to be part of a wider closing-down of space for civil-society organizations that has involved the detention or disappearance of feminist activists, human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists.

While labour NGOs are acting with more caution as a result, the impact of this latest round of repression on workers is more nuanced, with Hong Kong-based NGO China Labour Bulletin reporting a continued increase in strikes and labour unrest. A

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campaign by Walmart workers, largely carried out via social media, is the latest example of organizational innovation by activists operating in a difficult and authoritarian environment. Their network includes up to 10,000 people whose aim is to prevent management from introducing a new working-hours system that would make shift patterns less predictable and facilitate store closures and redundancies. They are demanding that Walmart and the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU, the only legally permitted trade union operating under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party) allow genuine trade union elections and that Walmart 'stop all repression and manipulation of election results, and reinstate unlawfully dismissed activist union members'.

## **A different role**

And here lies the rub. Worker representation is a particularly sensitive and difficult issue in former 'state socialist' countries such as China, Russia and Vietnam. Trade unions there traditionally played a very different role from unions in capitalist countries. As part of the State apparatus, they were charged with representing the interests of the whole working class – as expressed by the Communist Party – rather than of particular groups of workers. Their main task was not representation of their members' collective interests – except in the vaguest of terms – but rather to direct and encourage workers to meet production targets in exchange for job security and access to welfare.

With no tradition of workplace organizing, democratic accountability or collective bargaining, the official unions' capacity to defend workers' rights and interests under the conditions of capitalist globalization was always going to be a challenge. Workers have grown increasingly impatient with bureaucratic state trade union inertia and taken matters into their own hands.

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 – in part the outcome of massive miners' strikes in preceding years – was a mixed blessing for the working class. On the one hand, the subsequent neoliberal-inspired wave of privatizations and restructuring plunged workers into profound poverty as the economy nose-dived and state assets passed into the hands of corrupt oligarchs. On the other hand, workers won the right to organize. The traditional Communist Party-led trade union broke with the party in 1987 and renamed itself the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR). It has since faced competing pressure from more radical 'alternative' trade unions that have had some success in sectors such as transport and auto assembly, where workers have a degree of



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**Migrant workers join Hong Kong dockworkers in a protest for better working conditions. Though Hong Kong has more progressive labour laws than China, trade unionists still face discrimination and there is no law protecting the right to collective bargaining.**

structural power because of the importance of these industries to the country's economy.

However, the FNPR remains overwhelmingly the largest trade union organization in Russia and has tended to reproduce the traditional production-orientated passivity of Soviet times. Its leaders have openly rejected all forms of class struggle in favour of abstract notions of social partnership between boss and workers, and allied themselves closely with President Putin. While there are signs that alternative unions are regrouping after years on the sidelines, their activists and workplace reps are subject to physical attacks and an increasingly restrictive legal environment.

### **Collective interests**

Vietnam's transition to a market economy began with the *doi moi* ('renovation') reforms in 1986. Within a decade, workers acquired a reputation for militancy that shows no signs of fading. A record 994 strikes took place in 2011, with approximately 450 per year since. The official union, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL), rarely if ever organizes such direct action, and since labour law requires that legal strikes be led by it, all these were wildcat strikes that ignored

official grievance procedures, in which workers have little trust. More to the point, most of the strikes were won by the workers. This has generated pressure on the VGCL to improve its capacity to uphold worker rights, not just from workers themselves, but also from Communist Party leaders seeking to maintain a more stable investment environment.

Chinese workers too have demonstrated a significant capacity to improve their collective interests without the guidance of an independent trade union. A combination of labour shortages, improved labour laws and the emergence of labour NGOs has generated annual minimum and average wage increases of up to 35 per cent per year between 2005 and 2014.

Furthermore, worker militancy has encouraged the official Chinese union to experiment with various forms of improved representation, such as direct trade union elections and forms of accountable collective bargaining, particularly in southern Guangdong province, where the presence of pioneering Hong Kong-based labour NGOs and a more relaxed environment for labour relations have opened up space for workers to pursue their rights. Even more important, according to one labour activist in China, is the emergence of a small but significant layer of workers' representatives at the workplace level – usually in sectors where workers have structural power such as the auto industry and ports. There are also worker reps operating mainly 'outside the system, supporting workers' struggles in labour-intensive sectors such as shoes and electronics'.

Worker reps tend to be former employees with experience of strikes and negotiations with employers. They train workers in labour rights and negotiating skills, and provide support in emerging forms of collective bargaining. One prominent labour lawyer says that he views these reps as the 'backbone of the emerging labour movement and a sign of progress towards inclusive and accountable labour relations'. They are also the people being targeted by the authorities.

The obstacles blocking grassroots worker organizing and effective trade unions in China, Russia and Vietnam are framed by the histories of each respective nation-state. While freedom of association remains the major issue, capitalist globalization has created opportunities for innovative struggles and solidarity even as it continues to divide and weaken workers and their organizations. The key to solving the dilemma of worker representation in post-socialist countries – and, indeed, beyond – is the agency of workers themselves. ■

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