

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2592>



China

New signs of hope: Resistance in China today

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV447 - April 2012 -

Publication date: Monday 30 April 2012

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

The number of cases of resistance in China continues to grow. Protests both large and small are an extremely frequent occurrence in China. They range in scale and nature from workers' protests against unpaid wages or demands for increasing labour rights, to protests against corrupt officials or environmental protests. While protests have often been brought to a swift end via repressive means, struggles have also frequently led to concessions being granted to the protestors, as the party-state will adopt different means by which to limit social unrest and restore "social harmony".

The fact that the overwhelming majority of protests are spontaneous or limited to one locality or to a single issue, and furthermore due to fact that information and reports concerning struggles are frequently censored, makes it very difficult to view or comment conclusively regarding an in depth overall picture of resistance in China. However, there have been some struggles that have emerged more recently that have stood out for their significant new features, and which are worth commenting on as they seem to mark unprecedented steps forward or a change from the past. For twenty years, since the crack down on the democratic movement in 1989, deep demoralization has persisted among workers in the declining state sector, whilst among the booming private sector the low expectation of rural migrant workers has meant that they have been unaware of many of their rights. Thus workers' economic struggles in both sectors have been highly atomised and spontaneous. The recent cases show that things may begin to change, as they reflect higher awareness regarding the coordinating of struggles and even an aspiration for grass-root democracy. Although the party-state apparently remains very strong, there are signs at the provincial level that the party has to come to terms with this growing aspiration of the grassroots, hence these struggles subsequently offer us some new signs of hope. We would like to attempt here to provide an assessment of some of the more significant struggles of the last three years, to try to illustrate why they are significant in the context of China and why such forms of resistance could potentially be of importance for the future of wider resistance in China.

Labour Struggles

The Tonghua anti-privatisation struggle. [\[1\]](#)

The Tonghua anti-privatisation struggle of July 2009 is the first of such struggles that we would like to look at. The struggle by steel workers at the Tonghua Steel Mill in Jilin province, which led to the death of a factory boss, resulted in a victory for the workers and led to the plans to buy out and privatize the steel mill being dropped. The protest had begun when workers found out about plans for Jianlong steel to take over and control the company. The workers already had cause to resent this. Jianlong had already bought a 36% share in Tonghua in September 2005 and this had resulted in a wave of layoffs. In addition Jianlong had also previously temporarily controlled the company in 2008 and had fared badly financially when steel prices had fallen. Afraid of further job losses, in a city where the steel mill was the only major employer, when they found out about the planned takeover the workers decided to take action to protest against it. On the 24th July, therefore, a worker who had previously been laid off hung a banner outside the Tonghua main office building saying, "Jianlong, Get out of Tonghua" and workers started to blockade a railway in order to stop supplies from reaching the mill so as to cause the company to suspend production. Approximately 30,000 present and former workers and their families were involved in the protest.

The action ended after 10pm that night following factory boss Chen Guojin being beaten to death during the protest. Jianlong withdrew their offer to buy out the mill just hours after Chen was killed. Much of the workers anger had been specifically directed at Chen, who had first come to Tonghua in 2006 not long after Jianlong had first purchased a

stake in the company. He was resented not only due to the fact that he was seen as the representative of Jianlong and in addition was known for his tough disciplinarian management style, but also because of workers' recognition of the increased inequality and injustice in the pay differential between management and themselves that had occurred since Chen arrived. One report claimed, for instance, that while Chen was paid 3 million Yuan in 2008, some of the company retirees were receiving as little as 200 Yuan per month [2].

The struggle successfully stopped Jianlong's privatization in Tonghua. The following year China's Shougang Steel Group, a giant SOE, acquired a majority share in the company. Although this was a victory, it remains to be seen how long the workers can keep their jobs, since after restructuring SOEs are run as any other commercial entities with pressures to cut the cost of labour.

The Tonghua struggle is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it not only illustrates yet another case of resistance where Chinese workers are not prepared to passively sit back in the face of privatisation, the fact that in this struggle a manager was killed only goes to reflect the growing depth of the anger and desperation of workers whose livelihoods and means of survival are at stake, while management reap in the rewards and grant themselves even higher salaries. During the enterprise reforms since late 1980s, it was not uncommon to read in the news that individual workers killed the managers for sacking them or for cutting their wages, but this was never a collective action. Where there were collective actions – mostly demonstrations, camping in front of factories etc – they were moderate and very self disciplined due to fear of retaliation. The Tonghua incident is the first case where a manager was killed by a large group of workers and was supported by most other fellow workers. The workers' violence was also widely supported by netizens. Such a massive outbreak of anger by workers frightened the local government and forced the latter to make significant concessions to the workers. Whether it represents an individual case or is a sign that the demoralizing effect of the 1989 defeat on workers is now receding, still remains to be seen. But future SOE workers' struggles may refer to this example and continue draw inspiration from it.

Secondly, at more or less the same time as the Tonghua struggle, workers at the Linzhou Steel Company in Puyang city was also fighting against privatization and the victory at Tonghua greatly encouraged their struggle. At the height of the incident the workers locked up an official from the municipal government for 90 hours. They also ended their fight with a victory.

Thirdly, the Chinese steel industry, which is the world's largest, is an example of one of the industries in which many workers have lost their jobs as they have become victims of the large scale layoffs resulting from the central government policy of pushing the industries into privatization and/or a series of mergers aimed at making them globally competitive. In the ferrous metal industry, in the period 1996-2001, the workforce declined from 3.37 million to 2.04 million, a 40 percent fall in the workforce. [3] Although now just one fifth of the national working class, the Tonghua struggle proves that SOEs and collective enterprises workers can still be a formidable force. In addition to this is the fact that although the weight of both SOEs and their workforce has declined, the most important industries are still SOEs, even post restructuring, and this gives more power to these workers than numbers alone might suggest.

Finally, in the Tonghua case and the Linzhou case all the supposedly pro-labour institutions within the plants – the trade union, the staff and workers representative congress etc – proved ineffective at representing workers' interest. This was why workers at both plants took actions independently of the official trade union, despite many of the workers being members. One Tonghua employee speaking to China Daily commented that, "I can't remember the last time we had a conference with our union representative. The union certainly didn't do any good the day Chen was killed." [4]

The Honda Workers' Strike

In May 2010, what has been probably the most high profile incidents of strike action in China's recent history began when Honda workers in Foshan, Guangdong province, took action calling for higher wages and, perhaps even more significantly, the reorganization of their workplace trade union, triggering off a wave of strike action by workers in foreign-owned car plants that summer. Unlike in the case of the Tonghua struggle, these workers did not take action in the face of an imminent attack on them caused by potential job losses due to privatization, but already working at a privately owned enterprise, took action in order to actively improve on their current situation.

The strike action, which first began on the 17th May with around 100 workers going on strike, was followed by two further strikes on 21st May. This led to retaliation by Honda management who dismissed two of the workers' leaders. The workers did not give in, however, and the following day the strike spread as the whole factory went on strike bringing its production to a complete halt. The strike lasted for more than two weeks and only ended after regular workers at the plant had been offered a 35% pay increase and those working as interns at the factory had received a raise of more than 70%. Previously the Honda workers had been receiving wages which were well below the industry standards. Honda had also been particularly quick to exploit those on internship programmes, as they were not protected by Chinese Labour Law and so paid wages that were far below the minimum wage.

Despite the different circumstances in the action taken, as in the case of the Tonghua struggle, the ACFTU at the Honda plant was failing to protect the interests of the workers. Indeed, in the course of the strike the local level trade union showed that its interests did not really lie with the workers at all. On May 31st some of the striking workers reported that they had been physically attacked by men wearing union badges. Even after it issued a vague apology letter it was still clear that the union was more keen to encourage them to go back to work as quickly as possible, than to ensure a positive outcome for the workers. At an enterprise based level, however, the Honda workers recognized that their union was failing them and thus had made the reorganization of the workplace based union a key demand of the strike. In an open letter by worker representatives they condemned the branch trade union saying, "We are outraged by the trade union's appropriation of the fruits of the workers' struggles. We insist that the branch trade union of the factory shall be elected by the production line workers." [5] In the end, the workers were not able to realize this demand in their settlement with the management. Although the local trade union was soon to announce an election of the workplace union at the company in late August 2010, it turned out that this was only a by-election, where only part of the workplace union leadership was open to election and the original chairperson, who was very much resented by the striking workers, kept his seat. According to a study by Globalization Monitor in April 2012, the election in August 2010 and again in November 2011, hosted by the local trade union, was deliberately arranged in a highly complicated way – the election of union representatives alone went through four stages – such that members of the management were elected as members of the leadership, while the activists who led the strike in 2010 were pushed out altogether. Nevertheless, one positive development reported to have taken place is that the workplace union was able to negotiate a further wage increase in March 2011 as a result of collective bargaining with the management. [6]

The fact that many of the workers were so young - more than 50% of those who took part in the first strike in Foshan were high school students on internship programmes – is in itself significant. This is because it means that the strike represents the actions of a new generation of Chinese workers, who have no memory of their own of the defeat of the 1989 democracy movement – in fact most of them probably do not know of the event at all because of censorship – and who are prepared to fight to improve conditions at their own workplace. Whereas SOEs workers generally were not prepared to call for the re-election of workplace unions due to fear of being accused of "trying to get rid of the leadership of the party", these young workers in the private sector, mostly rural household holders or those coming from small cities, dared to break the taboo and call for the re-election of the workplace union.

Secondly, the Honda workers showed that they have a much broader vision than their parents. At the height of their struggle they made it clear that they saw their actions as being in the interests of the whole Chinese working class. In the words of the striking workers, "Our struggle to defend our rights is not just about fighting for ourselves, the 1800 workers of Honda. We are concerned about the rights of all the workers in the whole country. We want to set a good

example of workers struggling for their rights.” [7] We are not sure that how many workers may share this kind of vision, but one thing is certain, they are quite unlike their parents, who may say “ershi ding chushan, sishi ding shoushan” (when we are at twenty we all go to cities to work, and when we turn forty we all go back to our home village). Instead this young generation of rural migrant workers in general have a strong desire to establish roots in the cities, and are more likely to view themselves as part of the urban working people rather than as nongmingong. In fact, they rarely till the land at all and have little intention to live as peasants. Those who receive secondary education or vocational training are more likely to have a broader vision than their parents too. Even if the Honda case remains an individual case, like the Tonghua case it will nevertheless be referred to as an important signpost for the development of resistance among young rural migrant workers. What they can accomplish is still largely unknown but these young workers may surprise us in many ways in the near future.

The Pepsi workers’ struggle

Another significant recent example of protest action by workers was the protest by thousands of workers from Pepsi bottling plants, on the 14th November 2011, against an agreement between PepsiCo. Inc and Taiwanese Tingyi Holding Corporation (also known as “Master Kong”). As a result of the agreement, which involves PepsiCo giving up its bottling operations in China and transferring its equity interests to Tingyi-Asahi Beverages Holding Co. (TAB), a joint-venture between Tingyi and Japanese company Asahi Group Holdings Ltd, in exchange for a stake in this joint-venture company, workers were to have their existing contracts with PepsiCo terminated and would be forced to renegotiate them with TAB. On hearing the news, the workers, who claimed that they had previously known nothing about the deal between the companies, took the day off work [8] and protested to demand either that the takeover be halted or that if their contracts were to be terminated then they had a right to compensation from PepsiCo for its violation of the original contract.

The protest by the workers is significant because, unlike most workers’ protests in China, the workers took the unprecedented step of coordinating their action. Protests took place at bottling plants in more than five different cities at the same time, including Chongqing, Chengdu, Fuzhou, Changsha and Nanchang. Moreover following the protest action, an online campaign was organised to try and involve workers at all of PepsiCo’s bottling plants across China.

Subsequently on November 30th, Pepsi did actually announce some compensation packages for the workers, who were given the option of either staying on and working for one more year and then receiving a higher level of compensation pay, immediate compensation of a smaller amount, or to keep their current labour contracts without making any changes. Nevertheless posts on workers blogs, which were quickly deleted soon after they appeared, have indicated that at least among some works there was still dissatisfaction with the situation. On December 1st for instance, a Lanzhou Pepsi workers’ microblog stated that the workers did not agree with the terms offered by their employers and that workers were still demanding that their employers respond to the demands of their working party. If the management did not respond in time the workers threatened to do whatever they could within the law to express their grievances.

The alliance between PepsiCo and Tingyi was finally approved by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce at the end of March 2012. While there are reports that the works remain unsatisfied with the proposed compensation package, it remains to be seen whether any further action will be taken.

The Wukan Protests

Probably the most remarkable case of resistance of the last year was the 2011 struggle by villagers in Wukan, a

fishing village with a population of approximately 13,000, in Guangdong province. This struggle saw the ruling Communist Party temporarily completely losing control of the village to the villagers, and then even when this came to an end it was with a partial victory for the villagers, who were able to set about preparing to organise new independent elections to their village committee for the first time.

The Wukan incident began due to action taken by villagers' due to their opposition to illegal land seizures by corrupt government officials. "Land grabbing" is a common problem in China, and indeed it has been officially acknowledged that more than 43 percent of Chinese farmers have been victims of this and that local governments have made huge profits as a result. [9] Nevertheless, protests in opposition to such corruption have also been extremely frequent, something which has become of growing concern to China's leadership who are keen to maintain social stability, leading them to state at least in rhetoric that there is a need to protect peasants' rights. In Wukan, according to villagers, the problem of their land first being taken from them and sold off to property developers was something that had actually been going on since the mid 1990s. It was not until a few years ago, however, that a group of the villagers had first begun submitting legal complaints about corrupt officials misappropriating village land. It was then, in September 2011 that the villagers finally decided that they had had enough and came out onto the streets leading to mass protests, the storming of local government offices and the driving out of the party secretary.

In this instance, riot police were soon sent in to attack the villagers, however, and villagers were driven back. Although shortly afterwards, the local government asked the villagers to choose 13 representatives to represent them in mediation, as soon as the villagers' anger had died down, the government tried to get the village back under their control and in early December the representatives were arrested from a restaurant in Wukan, interrogated and then thrown into jail. Two days later, when riot police were again sent into the village, they were met by more mass protests from the villagers and despite attempts to regain control, by using tear gas and water cannons, police were pushed out of the village, retreating to a road block a few miles away, from where they tried to prevent food and water from entering the village as the protests continued. When it was heard that, Xue Jinbo, one of the thirteen village representatives had subsequently died in custody, anger at the news of this death only fuelled the determination to protest.

The Wukan protests were significant for a number of reasons. In the end, despite the initial brutality and the horrendous death of Xue Jinbo, the protests were not fiercely suppressed, as they have been known to be in the past, but rather they resulted in the release of those detained, the promise that the villagers' complaints would be addressed, and what is more, for the first time in decades, the official recognition of a provisional committee, founded by the villagers, by the municipal and provincial governments [10], hence allowing the villagers a vehicle to make preparations for elections for a new village committee to be held in which the villagers could themselves actively participate. This shows that struggle from below has the potential to change the party's practical ban on any form of autonomous organisation.

In February 2012 this then led to genuine elections being held in Wukan for the first time, to create an 11 member elections committee which would organise the election of a new village committee the following month. The old officials who had overseen the illegal selling off of the land had already been driven out. Much was done to ensure that these elections were open and democratic. Prior to these elections a census of the village population was conducted with the aim of aiding transparency and, according to a Xinhua report, more than 70% of those eligible took part in the ballot. Furthermore, all candidates were required to make a public statement announcing that they would not run in the forthcoming election to the village committee and were required to collect 50 signatures from their fellow villagers to support their running in the election so as to make sure that they at least had minimum support. According to the report many of the villagers, who were participating in an election for the first time, were very enthusiastic about it. [11] Following the February election of the election committee, in March the election to the new village committee was then held. One of the representatives hoped that this election might inspire the nation and that all levels of the government, from the villages to the central government will be democratically elected in the future. [12]

That the villagers won the right to these elections no doubt represents a remarkable and previously unprecedented step forward for the villagers in Wukan. Recent online comparisons have been made of the Wukan elections and the election for the Hong Kong Chief Executive have shown how Wukan is now more democratic than Hong Kong, both a reflection on the achievement of the villagers in Wukan as well as the lack of democracy in Hong Kong. What this new democracy will actually mean for the villagers of Wukan, however, is yet to be seen. Indeed, the problem of the illegal land seizures initially raised by the villagers, and which was the cause of the protests, has not yet been resolved and it is uncertain as to whether it really adequately will be.

It is also worth commenting on how despite the protestors denouncing the corruption of officials, the protest was not a protest against the Communist Party. There were in fact many banners and statements throughout the incident which actually expressed support for the Party, something commonly expressed at all varieties of different protests in China, and often reflecting the mentality that it is corrupt local officials rather than the central government who are to blame. Indeed among the protest leaders were Communist Party members, one of whom, Lin Zuluang has since been promoted to the position of party secretary of Wukan. The villagers' trust in him is reflected in how he was then later also elected by villagers to head the village committee in the March election, meaning that he now holds both the position of party secretary and head of the village committee.

The Wukan protests are also significant because they have the potential to act as inspiration to other struggles in China. One question which has frequently surfaced in the discussion over the implications of the Wukan incident is of how far the event or the subsequently much more democratic model that has emerged as a result of the protests has the potential to be replicated elsewhere in China. However, talk of a "Wukan model" is overly optimistic if not misleading. The events at Wukan can be seen in terms of a victory being brought about by determined grassroots resistance on such a scale, but also specific conditions, namely that one of the leaders of the struggle was a popular and skilful Communist party member, and that it had the support of a fully developed network of young villagers who made all efforts, through electronic devices and the internet, in breaking news censorship. An additional factor is probably the fact that the Guangdong provincial government has, in recent years, been seen as being a bit more tolerant towards economic protests, as it realizes that these are not necessarily threatening to the party state. If such reforms were to be introduced elsewhere from above, however, they would most likely only be on a limited scale and could be easily reversible at any time, for instance if candidates who lack party approval or are seen as a threat are elected. It would only be through more widespread struggle that saw beyond the immediate single issue that a more genuinely democratic and accountable model could emerge in China.

Environmental Protests

Environmental issues are also a major cause of protests in China. Despite government claims about aims to reduce environment pollution and to create a cleaner environment, such claims often have little meaning or are put aside where they conflict with the desire to attract investment. Nevertheless, due to feared social instability environmental protests have been known to have at least some successes.

Dalian

One recent example of a widely reported environmental protest comes from the Dalian struggle of August 2011, in which protests in the city of Dalian in Liaoning province, Northeast China, led to authorities ordering a petrochemical plant to be immediately shut down and pledges to relocate it elsewhere. The protest began after Dalian residents became concerned about the potential spill of toxic chemical paraxylene (PX) from the Fujia chemical plant following a heavy storm which had caused high waves to burst through the dyke protecting the plant. Despite the authorities insisting that there had been no spills, thousands of residents nonetheless took to the streets in anger about the spill and the safety risks that they were being exposed to by the plant. Many claimed that toxins had in fact leaked from

the plant and used slogans demanding “PX out of Dalian” and “Refuse PX”. It was furthermore reported that Chinese reporters who had tried to investigate at the plant had been beaten by security guards. [\[13\]](#)

As in many cases authorities were keen to limit the scale of social unrest and early into the protests the mayor of Dalian, Li Wancai, tried to appease protesters by offering to relocate the plant, however many of the protesters demanded that a clear timetable had to be established first before they would end the protests. Indeed one of the key issues, which this protest highlighted, was the clear mistrust of the authorities by the residents. In the words of one demonstrator, ““Even if there was contamination, the government would restrict the news.” [\[14\]](#)

This was not the first protest to lead to the scrapping of a project involving the chemical PX. Following protests in Xiamen in 2007, for instance, the authorities there were also pushed into halting a similar project and moving it out of the city's jurisdiction.

Despite the Dalian protest ending with what seemed like a victory for the protesters with the plant being shut down and the promise that the authorities would relocate it to Xizhong island, reports have since suggested that the Dalian factory may have been reopened, although much of the news reporting on the plant's resumption on mainland websites has since been removed. [\[15\]](#) If the plant has indeed reopened then it reflects just how little the word of the authorities' means and how easy it is for them to backtrack on their promises at any time.

Haimen

In December 2011 thousands of villagers protested for four days in Haimen, a town in Guangdong province not so far away from Wukan, by blocking a road and surrounding government offices, to express their opposition towards the planned expansion of a coal-fired power station owned by state-run Huaneng Power. The residents were prompted to protest due to concerns about the high level of pollution, which they said was already leading to health problems including a rise in the number of cancer cases, from the existing power station.

In this case riot police who fired tear gas at the crowd were sent in to try to break up the protest, which resulted in injuries and also reports of two deaths. The incident also resulted in a few of the protesters being detained, allegedly for vandalism. Due to fear that the protests might grow, and probably with Wukan in mind, many efforts were made to deter protesters. Students, for instance, were reported as having been prevented from leaving school until late in the day out of fear that they might join in with the protest. [\[16\]](#) Meanwhile, local televisions broadcast clips showing legal experts warning that those who joined the protests could face up to five years in prison. [\[17\]](#)

Reports have indeed suggested that many of the residents in Haimen had been following the situation in Wukan and were influenced by it. The fact that these two events were taking place at the same time would no doubt have only added to the pressure put on the provincial government and may also have contributed to the quick decision being made regarding the suspension of the power station project, once the immediate response of trying to deter protesters had failed. Authorities would certainly not want there to be any chance of events at Haimen spiralling out into another Wukan, potentially involving even larger numbers. The protest therefore resulted in the Shantou city government, under whose jurisdiction Haimen falls, announcing that the project was to be temporarily suspended and with the detained protesters being released. No promises were made to put a stop to the plan altogether, however.

Conclusion

As the cases here have shown, resistance in China can bring about limited positive change. This is important not

New signs of hope: Resistance in China today

only in terms of the benefits of the immediate victory, such as to halt privatisation, to win better working conditions or to limit harm to the environment but more importantly as such victories can act to inspire the future action of others and help to impact on the potential for their positive outcome, as is illustrated by the influence that the struggles of the Tonghua steel workers, the Honda workers and the villagers of Wukan had on other similar struggles at the same time. The forms that resistance have taken also reflect how the current generation are becoming increasingly bolder. Although still on a smaller scale, the attempt by Pepsi workers to coordinate their action is of particular note in this respect. Even if such coordination was contemplated in the past, fear of the consequences would only have acted as a deterrent. The fact that the young Honda workers made the claim that they were acting interests of the whole Chinese working class again shows how there are signs that this new generation, free from the memory of the terrible defeat of 1989, has the potential ability to see beyond their immediate issue and to identify with wider concerns. Although at present these remain but small signs, they give us reason not to give up hope.

[1] The following sections on the Tonghua anti-privatisation struggle and on the Honda Workers' Strike are adapted from our article "The Case for an Autonomous Labour Movement in China," Au Loong Yu and Bai Ruixue.

[2] [30,000 China steel workers in deadly clash.](#)

[3] Woguo zhongchangqi shiye wenti yanjiu (Research on China Medium and Long Term Unemployment) , Jiang Xuan, China People's University Press, Beijing, 2004, p.181.

[4] Cited in China Labour Bulletin, "[China debates the lessons of Tonghua tragedy](#)".

[5] [Open Letter to the Public and All the Workers in Honda Auto Parts Manufacturing Co., Ltd., 3rd June 2010.](#)

[6] [Nanhai bentian laozi tanpan, jinnian gongzi zaizhang 600 yuan. \(Honda Nanhai Wage Negotiation Resulted in Raising 611 Yuan wages for This Year.](#)

[7] [Nanhai bentian gongren daibiao fachu gongkaixin [Honda Nanhai Workers Representatives' Open Letter, June 3, 2010.](#)

[8] Workers are reported to have claimed that they were not on strike but simply protesting to demand their rights.

[9] [Nearly half China farmers suffer land grabs. AFP. February 7th 2012.](#)

[10] Although, it is also significant that the Honda Foshan workers representatives won official recognition as elected as grassroots representatives, which is rare, in their negotiating with the management.

[11] Guangdong Wukan cunmin yiren yi piao tuixuan cunmin xuanju weiyuanhui, Xinhua Guangdong, February 2nd 2012.

[12] Ming Pao, December 18, 2011.

[13] Cited in "[Tens of thousands protests against chemical plant in Northern China](#)", [Guardian, 14th August 2011.](#)

[14] Ibid

[15] [Dalian Plant Re-opens after protests dissipate.](#)

[16] [Chinese official denies reports of deaths at Haimen Protest, Reuters, 21st December 2011.](#)

[17] [Police fire tear gas at protesters in Chinese city, New York Times, 23rd December 2011.](#)