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Workplace organizing in China

Worker organising under the pandemic: reflections from China

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Below is our [Chuang] translation of an anonymous Chinese article from the mainland left blog Worker Study Room (工研室), originally published in [May 2020](#). It is the only attempt we're aware of to provide a systematic overview of workers' lives and job conditions, labour struggles and related activism in China since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in January, although there have been accounts of individual cases, some of which are cited here. It is also written from a perspective with which we are largely sympathetic. That said, the emphasis here, as in much writing of this style, is placed on somewhat schematic and dry documentation of exact demands made within the workplace and the precise order of events, to the exclusion of any substantial inquiry into the broader psychology of proletarians confronted with a moment such as this. The piece is a good representation of what we consider to be the most fruitful left-wing current in contemporary China, which concerns itself primarily with worker inquiry and the transmission of workers' stories between factories. At times, writing from this current can produce a "workerist" form of analysis that sometimes risks missing the forest of capitalism in the trees of individual factory struggles, and which can occasionally even fail at its own allotted tasks when its descriptions of events are too banal to hold the interest of anyone aside from other similarly workerist activists.

The piece below, however, is a high-caliber example of the genre. It not only succeeds in framing the overall dynamic across regions and beyond individual struggles, but also hints at the potentials hidden in some of the pandemic organising that extended outside the workplace alone. Altogether, the result is an excellent overview of organising among Chinese workers (and students) under the lockdown and in the midst of the re-opening. Most striking here are a few of the telling contrasts with conditions in Europe and, in particular, the United States. In almost every respect, the Chinese situation seems to be an inversion of that in the US, where the shutdown helped to spur the largest, most assertive mass rebellion in recent history, including a steady simmer of labour unrest that has gone relatively unnoticed beneath the more spectacular riots against the police. In China, however, despite a recent history of worker organising, struggles have remained muted. In part, this is almost certainly due to another, identical inversion: the fact that China readily contained the pandemic while the US is brutally failing to do so.

But there is also a more telling inversion hinted at in the text below, relating to the question of exactly how China was able to successfully contain the initial outbreak. It remains evident that Chinese state capacity, while in the ascent, is nonetheless lower than that seen elsewhere (in, say, Taiwan, South Korea or any given European nation). Meanwhile, the American state seems powerful and rich in expertise, even if it is clearly in decline. How, then, was China able to mobilize the resources to contain the outbreak in such a large population? Largely, it was through an effective recognition of the limited capacity of the state, and a subsequent devolution of power not only to local governments (who were given wide-ranging authority for containment) but also to numerous ad hoc mutual aid groups of the type outlined in the text below. It was largely the activity of regular Chinese people that helped to contain the virus many of whom, in particular medical workers, put in immense work and took serious personal risks. Containment was emphatically not the product of the quasi-magical powers of an authoritarian state, as many media accounts would have us believe. The difference in the US, of course, is the absence of a similar popular mass mobilization around containment of the virus, with this task being deferred to the supposedly competent state authorities, who have proved themselves anything but. Instead, the US government has demonstrated that it does, indeed, still have an immense capacity for coordination and the allocation of resources but this capacity has been directed almost exclusively into the hands of the police state and away from any real social functions. Such a shift is clearly indicative of a once capacious state in the throes of a decades-long decay.

Overall, then, the piece translated here gives one of the best windows into the average Chinese worker's experience under the pandemic, while also giving some illustration of the broader social organising that helped to contain the

outbreak. Meanwhile, it acts as a superb case study of some of the more advanced practical analysis offered by the Chinese left.

[Chuang](#)

Update from the authors, 17 July 2020

Two months after the publication of this article, the global pandemic is still raging. China's strict controls and effective contact tracing mechanisms have thus far prevented a second large-scale outbreak from occurring. Even when a resurgence occurs in one locale, it is quickly brought under control. Meanwhile, people's initial anger about the state's coverup of the epidemic was soon redirected against a few specific officials in Wuhan. Later, even this discontentment dissipated as the pandemic worsened abroad and people could contrast this with the gradual return to normalcy within China. Popular sentiment shifted toward praise and gratitude for the state's success in bringing the pandemic under control domestically. Beyond that, the international crusade against China led by the US has even become the focal point for a renewed patriotism.

Except for the brief surge of protests and discussion that followed the death of Dr. Li Wenliang, which was quickly suppressed, China has not witnessed any large-scale collective acts of resistance in the half year since the pandemic broke out. Compared with many other countries, our nation of 1.4 billion has remained unnervingly tranquil.

Let's take the industries of healthcare and delivery services, for example, two that have featured prominently in the labour-related protests abroad over the past few months. During the first two weeks of the lockdown then in force only in a few cities like Wuhan and provinces like Hubei which were facing severe outbreaks in late January and early February healthcare workers expressed intense anxiety regarding the state of panic, inhumanly long working hours, risks to their health and shortages of equipment they were suddenly forced to deal with. However, the pandemic was soon brought under control throughout most of the country, and a run on medical resources was ultimately averted. The nation's medical resources were transferred into the affected areas, quickly relieving the pressure on healthcare workers. The state provided material rewards for healthcare workers (although they didn't all make it into the hands of the workers themselves), and the discourse of "heroes in the fight against the pandemic" affirmed their contributions and sacrifices. Both counteracted the negative psychological effects of the situation on these workers. Some of those who volunteered to go work on the frontlines in Hubei expressed that in the process they actually regained a sense of vocational pride in their work as healers: the occupational contradictions that marketization had brought to the industry, performance evaluation, quotas of patient turnover related to profitability, etc. all these worries temporarily disappeared, so they could finally focus on treating patients, while being widely respected for their work.

Since this pandemic broke out during the Chinese New Year, people had already stockpiled food and other supplies as usual, preparing to relax at home for a few weeks, so delivery orders actually declined significantly in comparison with the rest of the year. By the same token, however, most of the delivery workers were also on holiday, so there was still a serious shortage of labour in the industry. In response, delivery platforms raised their rate of payment. Workers reported that their interactions with customers had never been so harmonious as they became during height of the pandemic, since the workers were glad to make more money than they normally did, and customers were grateful to obtain the food and supplies that had grown so hard to come by. Moreover, there was some degree of lockdown all over China, and in places with serious outbreaks, residents were prohibited from going outside at all, and the delivery of supplies was coordinated by local authorities through the use of specialized personnel. Many places prohibited delivery workers from entering residential complexes, so instead they left packages at the entrance from where volunteers would then deliver them to the door of each home, increasing safety for the workers and residents alike. After the lockdown ended, most delivery companies continued monitoring the health of their employees in order to coordinate with the authorities, going so far as to send the workers' health status to the

customers.

Factors such as these reduced the negative effects of the pandemic on workers in industries facing the greatest risks, so it isn't hard to understand why there was less resistance than in other countries regarding safety measures. On the economic front, however, resistance occurred throughout the pandemic and continues into the present. In May, healthcare workers in Xuzhou, Jiangsu went on strike against moves to privatize the public hospital where they worked. Periodic strikes have occurred among food delivery workers against fines and pay cuts. And over the past two months (June and July), there has been a slight increase in the number of labour disputes in the manufacturing and service sectors. Overall, though, no large-scale collective actions have occurred, probably because the economic slowdown has made everyone pessimistic about the prospects of winning any significant gains, coupled with the state's heavy-handed repression of the few struggles that have occurred, which are detailed below.

Worker organising during the pandemic

By [Worker Study Room](#), May 2020

This article focuses on workers' organising and actions in China during the pandemic, particularly within the Pearl River Delta (PRD). The article aims to bring together some useful information and make an initial analysis of the situation.

Self-organisation among ordinary people

The unprecedented health crisis of COVID-19 witnessed the rapid emergence of self-organised mutual aid among residents and students. These included localized organisational efforts by residents of Wuhan and other parts of Hubei, people elsewhere organising from a distance to provide support for healthcare workers and patients in the province, as well as similar local self-organisation in other cities and regions.

There also emerged some temporary organisations and actions related more directly to the interests of workers as such. The most noticeable of these were the "face mask supply groups" providing masks and equipment to sanitation workers such as street-sweepers. The main participants in these groups were students, who investigated the poor safety conditions of the sanitation industry and decided to provide the workers with PPE such as masks and gloves, as well as with educational materials about how to protect oneself during the pandemic.

The formation of the face mask supply groups across the various regions was not the result of any plan made in advance. Instead, these were initiatives seeded online in response to the immediate situation that then bloomed rapidly across the country. The process by which such groups formed in each place thus had a character unique to that location. In some places they formed out of university student groups that were already concerned with social issues, elsewhere they evolved from the aforementioned groups initially focused on sanitation workers, while in still others places groups formed with the involvement of explicitly left-wing students.

The organisational practices of these groups were relatively open. Those who initiated their formation did not exercise absolute authority over the groups within a hierarchical system, and the planning of events and division of labour were decided through discussion among participants. Many of the founders did not have any experience with social or community work, and some were not even in the locale where the team would be operating but were instead participating online. The groups worked through the democratic, egalitarian participation of all, with enthusiastic

volunteers collecting and sharing information day and night.[1]

The face mask supply groups mainly operated online, the whole process was transparent and open, and their activities were not politically sensitive: they did not pull back the dark curtain (exposing secrets of state malfeasance) or provoke negative public opinion, playing a supplementary role to the state's counter-pandemic work rather than an antagonistic one. The groups also consciously adopted a cautious approach to any possible risks. For example, when it came to fundraising, the volunteer groups paid close heed to the new Charity Law's strict regulations about what types of entities are allowed to raise funds. Some dealt with this obstacle by affiliating themselves with more established foundations. All of the groups working in this area were highly cognizant of the domestic political situation and avoided unnecessary risks. Even though some of those involved in establishing these groups were known to have been under surveillance by the authorities, the groups were not prevented from functioning.

Online organising

Since face-to-face communication had largely ceased during the pandemic, an array of online activities emerged. Based on our own observations, numerous new groups focused on worker issues have formed. These include: groups that are calling for, organising and conducting online polls to press the government to extend the Spring Festival holiday; groups that have formed to protect worker rights when they resume work; and other groups to share information about trends in the pandemic, protective measures against the virus and policy information. The founders and participants in these groups have some relationship with pre-existing student groups focused on social issues, have been in worker organisations and include some left-wing activists. The workers in these online groups are from different factories and they are often from different places, meaning that they were not familiar with each other prior to the pandemic.

It was easy for people to participate in groups such as those that were mobilizing to extend the Spring Festival break. This is largely because the goals were clear, the timeframe for action was short, there was not much need to establish deep connections between people involved and it was easy to see a result through online activity. But for groups like those organising to protect workers' rights and wages when they resume work, it's only through the workers taking action in their own workplaces that they can resolve the issue. For online organising, where participants are not familiar with each other and are dispersed, it's difficult to take meaningful action. And this is without even considering the extra difficulties and risks posed by state surveillance. As a result, at this point such groups are primarily involved with providing advice, outlining the situation that workers are facing, and providing a forum for communication.

These groups also play a role in educating and circulating analyses of the unfolding events. The conditions of the pandemic have pushed workers to focus on wider issues than those of their wages and income. Since so many long-standing social crises have now become evident within the more general catastrophe, the tricks of the ruling class have also been made plain for all to see. While ordinarily workers tend to avoid thinking about the impact of current events on their life, it is impossible not to consider the impact of the pandemic on society and on oneself. For example, people are now driven to ask questions like: where did the outbreak come from, and how did it spread? Meanwhile, they begin to contemplate the importance of social security and wonder what a safe return to work might look like.

Activities of Pearl River Delta workers during the pandemic

Worker organising under the pandemic: reflections from China

For the sake of making this narrative clearer, the analysis of the period from January 23 until the time of writing (in May 2020) will be split into three parts more or less corresponding to distinct phases of the pandemic:

(1) Start of the Pandemic: Late January to Early February

(2) First Stage of the Return to Work: Mid-February to Early March

(3) Later Stage of the Return to Work: After Mid-March

Start of the pandemic: late January to early February

Industrial workers in the PRD appeared calm during the relief operations at the beginning of the outbreak.

At the time of the initial outbreak, workers had already left their workplaces for the Spring Festival holidays to visit their hometowns and were therefore dispersed across the country. Thus, most were monitored by their respective neighborhoods or villages, which operated through a program of family-based prevention. Workers who had already had difficulty linking up in an effective way while in the factory were now further scattered apart by the sudden onset of the pandemic. Moreover, many ordinary workers found it to difficult to obtain the prophylactic medical resources they needed and to coordinate online. It is therefore not surprising that workers in general appeared to be passive and silent.

Sanitation workers, who have been the focus of much attention during this pandemic, have not undertaken any significant collective action that we know of, despite their working throughout the whole period. Even in areas where there has been a tradition of resistance in the past, the response from sanitation workers has been muted, and other workers who remained working during the Spring Festival, such as those in transportation and logistics, including delivery workers, have not carried out any significant action aimed at raising protection requirements. Some possible reasons for this might be: When Wuhan was sealed off and news of the pandemic first came out, most people did not have a clear idea of the severity of the new coronavirus and were unaware of the danger. Later, as news of the outbreak spread nationwide through official and private channels, and quarantine control measures were strengthened everywhere, the pandemic did not break out on a large scale outside Hubei. Therefore, the workers who remained working didn't feel very threatened by the disease. This is different from many countries across Europe and the Americas where workers from various industries working in life-threatening situations during the spread of the pandemic went on strike in order to demand protective measures.

Beyond this, sanitation workers in non-infected areas were already in normal times facing occupational health and safety issues such as noncompliance with protective measures. These pre-existing problems only become prominent during outbreaks of infectious diseases, which finally bring them into more widespread attention through the work of such volunteers. For sanitation workers (and similarly for other workers), occupational health and safety issues, while directly related to their own health, belong to a more advanced level of concern than wage issues. Before the workers felt their health was really in danger they generally treated the problem with a somewhat lackadaisical attitude, hoping that dumb luck would protect them (¥xÃ). Overall, the issue of occupational health and safety is more complex than the issue of wages since it requires that workers grasp more information. This is why systematically organised education efforts are needed for workers to be able to achieve an improvement in this field. The activity of the volunteer face mask supply groups was one such "external" effort directed towards the sanitation workers, providing them with donated equipment and information about personal protection. Meanwhile, these student volunteers also had an opportunity to step out of their lives, previously focused solely on school, and come into contact with a social group from a very different background. All this is of course still a long way from bringing about a collective action by workers.

A small number of spontaneous actions

A senior employee of a private company in Shenzhen who had already experienced SARS was, upon hearing news about the pandemic in early January, conscientious enough to take the initiative of ordering face masks to protect his coworkers. Because the company was unresponsive, he set up an awareness-raising group for protection measures among his coworkers and started stocking up on masks. When the company restarted operations and demanded workers return to their posts, he again made an appeal to his colleagues to collectively demand that they continue working from home. He reminded the young audience listening to his presentation that: "Our present is your future. Most of the people who graduate will go on to work for someone else. Making money is the only thing bosses care about, not the health of their employees. For us it's a matter of life and death."

There were also frontline workers who used the group to post information about where to locally buy affordable protective equipment, and helping others in the community to obtain these goods at a reasonable price.

Other than this, there were, according to our knowledge and China Labour Bulletin statistics, only a few random wage demands made in this period.

First stage of the return to work: mid-February to early March

For various reasons, the State Council extended the Spring Festival holiday to February 2nd, with each province setting its own exact time for the resumption of work. Most provinces implemented a gradual return to work beginning no earlier than February 10th (day 17 of the first lunar month), but, because of the pandemic, certain provinces and municipalities postponed the resumption of operations in construction and other industries to a later date.[2] This partial postponement was an official government policy in the form of an executive order that was publicly announced via lower-level government departments. It is unclear how the policy was drawn up, since the process of its formulation was not transparent. However, when coupled with a series of stringent control measures, it did actually help to stem a new outbreak of the pandemic after the return to work, which meant that people returned to work without undue fear and panic over the risks of being infected. Consequently, with the exception of online groups calling for a more general postponement of the return to work altogether, workers' resistance during the initial stage of this period was rather weak and there are no reports of large-scale incidents over issues of protective equipment or health policies in the companies that had resumed production.

To restart work, companies had to comply with protective measures and submit to a series of audits conducted by the local government.[3] If new cases appeared in any company or factory, they were to immediately stop operations and isolate the whole company or even the whole building.[4] In the initial return to work period, neighborhoods and factories were imposing stringent quarantine measures for workers. For example, factories with dormitories demanded that employees remain inside dorm rooms under a lock-down regime. In factories with canteens, the dining tables were slightly modified by adding screens to guarantee separation for individuals sitting down to eat. In factories without canteens, employees were required to eat their meals while scattered outdoors. As a result, most people were not overly concerned about getting infected upon returning to work. On top of this, there were punitive measures for firms that didn't follow the rules: if some small companies restarted work in violation of the policy, workers would complain to the subdistrict office or to the management of the industrial park and the company would be penalized and instructed to rectify the situation. There were occasional reports in the media of factories, training schools, places of entertainment and similar enterprises which had restarted production early, and in such cases the persons in charge were put under "administrative detention" (L?ØY).[5] The government, whether central or local, adopted stringent measures in order to more tightly control potential new outbreaks, and there were many channels for complaints. In particular, people could use WeChat to directly reach relevant departments and log complaints on

any manner of incident related to the pandemic.[6] To resolve issues pertaining to the revival of production, workers could now (in contrast with the normal situation) more easily complain when factories violated regulations. The result was that collective actions became less likely.

In this period the main conflicts were to be found in the necessity of simultaneously controlling the pandemic and restarting production. There were only a limited number of companies truly capable of realizing an all-round return to work. Besides strict control measures and complicated return to work procedures, the temporary shutdown of public transport in Hubei, Henan, Liaoning, Shandong, Hebei and other provinces as well as certain cities also significantly hindered the flow of workers back to the factories. Many cities and provinces simply imposed a two week self-quarantine period before returning workers could go back to work.[7] On top of this, many workers were afraid of getting infected on their journey back or in the factory itself and so refused to return. This meant that many companies were unable to fully restart their operation even after being officially allowed to do so. In order to both control the pandemic and address the sudden labour shortage, many places did all they could to make sure that factories got a sufficient supply of labour power and chartered transport to bring workers from labour-exporting localities to factories in the PRD and the Yangtze Delta.[8] At the same time factories increased their drive for new staff through methods like giving rewards to recruiters. Enterprises like the Shenzhen Foxconn plant even adopted recruitment strategies such as the "I want to hire" (•X) campaign, during which they promised every newcomer that came into the company before the 31st of March a record high bonus of up to 7,110 yuan.[9]

Later stage of the return to work: after mid-March

Outstanding wage disputes

Wages have been the principle concern of the class struggle between labour and capital. As soon as the phased-in return to work was announced, then, the calculation of wages became the focal point for everyone involved, with all kinds of lawyers swarming online to decipher the policy. Even though the Department of Human Resources and Social Security immediately released an even more clear explanation of the official document in particular clarifying the expectations in regard to workers who fall sick and pay during periods of isolation this didn't prevent companies from passing the costs of pandemic-related work stoppages and isolation onto their workers, with a number of small enterprises even using particularly bizarre methods to suppress workers' gains.

Sure enough, as workers (now going in March) obtained their February salaries one after the other, inquiries about wages began to increase, as did online lectures about how exactly to calculate them. A few relatively large-scale enterprises which were already in line with regulations correctly understood the situation and kept their wage calculations more or less in line with the official legislation, leaving their employees very little legal room to challenge them. That said, there's also been news of some workers' demands pushing beyond the provisions laid out in the law. For example, workers at Foxconn in Shenzhen made formal complaints through their [official ACFTU] union in order to change the company's policy of forcing employees to use their yearly vacation time to cover their period of isolation.[10] By contrast, those small enterprises that were already violating regulations on a day to day basis prior to the pandemic continued as usual, confiscating wages and generally leaving workers' pay in a state of disarray. Wage arrears, lowered pay during the extended isolation period, or even treating the isolation period for migrants returning to work from outside the area as if it were a leave of absence for a personal matter these were the main issues being discussed and reported by workers.

The continued blockage of roads prevented many workers registered in Hubei from returning to work elsewhere, making the problem of severe wage arrears and reduced pay even more widespread. Three such workers employed at an underwear factory in Shenzhen didn't receive their back wages after returning to work, and were instead told that they needed to apply for personal leave for February and March. Similar allegations spread through online

media, where it was claimed that some large-scale enterprises in Shenzhen were docking the wages of Hubei-registered workers who had spent their two months of isolation in their hometowns to a degree beyond that experienced by other workers, with the lowest only being paid a mere 600 yuan. As one worker lamented: "The pandemic has already caused such suffering for us Hubei people, this wage issue is only adding oil to the fire!" The companies then played further tricks, not even sending the reduced wages to workers who were in quarantine in Hubei, or asking other employees to "donate" to support their coworkers. Certainly, many enterprises suffered serious losses due to the shutdown, but how much could they really recoup by docking wages? In reality, the situation is summarized well by one worker, in a report made to the labour bureau complaining of a firm not in line with regulations: "It's not that the company is not turning a profit, just that it's making less than before."

On the 20th of March, workers at the electric car firm BYD which had just received a 2.3 billion yuan subsidy from the government made headlines for unfurling a protest banner. As one employee explained: "Our bonuses were all cut: bonuses for productivity, for working time and for performance points.[11] Then the one week of doubled salary that we'd originally promised was cancelled on the 16th, making everybody angry." [12] Although BYD officials have declared that the version of events reported online is untrue, this and other grievances from BYD employees continues to be posted on places such as Baidu forums.

Throughout March, dissatisfaction among workers generalized due to declining income. But the actions ignited by this dissatisfaction don't actually appear to have been very aggressive. While there are, for example, reports of a thousand workers at an electronics factory in Shenzhen protesting the reduction in pandemic pay by collectively requesting a leave of absence or simply skipping work, it has been far more common for workers to seek formal legal advice, file official complaints, or make allegations online.[13] Some possible reasons for this are that, for the most part, the issues only really applied to income for a short period of time, and that everyone could see the losses being taken by enterprises under the pandemic with their own eyes. The result was that neither expectations nor motivation were particularly high.

In addition to this, the Labour Bureau was already prepared for battle, ready to prevent and control such disputes between capital and labour at every level of government, from the central state down to local administration. As conflicts arose, they all coordinated to release a series of guidelines and measures to be used in managing industrial relations.[14] At the same time, the lowest-level government agencies strengthened the forces they'd deployed to resolve such disputes, or even broke new ground by setting up online platforms for mediation or having local level officials mediate directly in order to ease the tension between capital and labour.[15] This was all particularly effective in dissolving workers' shared grievances into an array of individual complaints, thereby reducing the potential for collective action.

The high tide of lost work and halted production

The severe scarcity of work experienced in February continued into the first third of March. As the virus spread to Europe and the US, the automobile, clothing and electronics industries were greatly impacted, and the effects were worst for companies engaged in export processing and foreign trade.[16] Gradually, the common practice of working regular overtime became more rare, hiring paused, and then production. On the internet and within workers' groups on social media, it became common to see reports about several months of time off being circulated.[17] Rumors emerged online that, due to the steep decline in Apple sales, Foxconn workers would be asked to take four months off starting in May. Foxconn's official response to these rumors was that "the factory districts of mainland China are currently all operating as usual, and there simply isn't a situation of mass layoffs or forced vacations." But regardless, large portions of the country had stopped hiring new workers, and the decline in overtime was an undeniable fact.[18]

Aside from compulsory leave, some companies also used other methods to cut down on labour costs during the production stoppage, including encouraging workers to resign or to request an unpaid absence. Thus, questions of

pay during the shutdown, alongside both overt and covert layoffs, ensured that wage demands would once again become prominent. At one technology firm in Guangzhou, employees alleged that the company requested every department place 15-20% of its staff on 6 months leave until orders began coming in again, at which point they'd be expected to return to work. Meanwhile, the company planned to immediately deduct the 6 months from the workers' social insurance funds in advance for the time they'd be on "vacation." [19] This made the workers placed on leave absolutely indignant. On the one hand, they felt that it was simply unfair, but on the other, it was more than unfair, since the company was making cuts to their social insurance at the same time that their income had been reduced to an unsustainable level. Some workers complained to the Labour Bureau, but they were simply told that the company was within its rights to arrange time off, and all that could ultimately be done was to strive for regular social insurance deductions, as opposed to the advance deductions announced by the company.

In the midst of all this there were also workers who were still on the job, but even they didn't have it easy. Employers used every method to reduce their official staff numbers, leaving those who remained with heavier burdens. The remaining work intensified, and workers grew dissatisfied even as they went along with it. Complaints arose in every industry. Those heard in manufacturing were a mirror image of those heard in food service: the bosses said that business was not good and therefore they had to cut staff, but, in reality, the amount of work for those left never actually decreased that much. They didn't get any days off, and they didn't get paid for overtime either. If anyone asked for more money, the bosses would just say, "Get the damn work done or go home there are tons of people out there waiting to take your place."

Meanwhile, news of numerous bankruptcies began to arise. It was reported that the Fantastic Toys (玩具) factory, which had been in operation in Dongguan for 30 years, began to see its cash flow fragment. [20] Early on in the pandemic, the boss had briefly disappeared, becoming difficult to contact. He finally reappeared on the 24th of March, only to announce that the factory was shutting down. Negotiations between workers owed backpay and the district labour bureau ended with no results, and when they went to file a complaint with the Dongguan city labour bureau they were met by attackers of unknown origin (maybe thugs hired by the company, possibly cops out of uniform), clashed with them and were dispersed, some suffering injuries. [21] Nor was this an isolated example. According to the National Enterprise Bankruptcy Disclosure Platform, from January 1st to March 15th of this year, there were already 8,243 cases of bankruptcy. In the corresponding time period for 2019, there had been 4,895 and for the same period in 2018, only 2,078. [22]

Confronted with the rapidly changing situation in these first few months which saw declining overtime, work stoppages and layoffs, all resulting in lowered income it seems that workers were still in a period of adaptation, so the forms of struggle that emerged were largely defensive in character. According to statistics gathered by the China Labour Bulletin, collective actions by workers from January to April of 2020 were fewer than those seen in the same time period in 2019. As in the past, it may be that there have been some more limited collective actions on the part of workers at certain enterprises that have not yet been picked up by the news and have therefore been difficult to hear about. But it may also simply be that, up to this point, no large or sustained collective actions have taken shape. For most workers who've suddenly become unemployed or been asked to take compulsory time off, the normal response has been to find temporary work of some sort in order to supplement their income or to return to rural hometowns in order to reduce their cost of living, all the while waiting for the situation to improve before they begin looking for work again.

Comparing the current crisis with that of 2008-2009

There are many comparisons being made between the present crisis and that of 2008-2009. During that crisis, many industries made cuts to workers' conditions and wages, factories ceased production, and there was a wave of closures across the PRD. At that time workers were also dissatisfied with their situation, but most chose to put up

with it and worker protests went into a lull. However, as the economy picked up again, workers started a new cycle of actions.

So, how does the current situation compare? If we analyze the conditions of employment, wage income, commodity prices and other elements related to workers' lives, we find at least the following points:

In 2009, while there was also a significant number of workers who lost their jobs and returned to their hometowns and villages, many of those workers would have had some amount of savings. And following the subsequent and substantial state investment in infrastructure, the renewed stimulus for domestic demand, and the recovery of the global economy, it wasn't long before workers could find a job again. But the economic prospects for the PRD today are far less hopeful. After all, at that time the Chinese economy was still in a period of growth and development. But since 2014 the domestic economy has entered a weaker "new normal," characterized by a declining growth rates. The impact of the pandemic has already caused a huge reduction in income and we are seeing the beginning of widespread bankruptcy of businesses large and small. At this point it is unclear when these conditions will ease.

As a result, it seems that the unemployment situation in the PRD (and we might even say for the Chinese economy as a whole) is far more serious this time around. Even though the national unemployment rate for March 2020 was only 5.9%, this is still an increase of 0.7% on the March reading for 2019. But according to a report by Zhengtai Securities, in reality the number of unemployed has already surpassed 70 million people, in which case the unemployment rate would be 20.5%.[23] The latter figure is more in accordance with what is generally understood about the current situation.

Coupled with the already widespread condition of temporary and insecure employment, it will be a long time before many workers find stable and secure work again. This condition is not limited to common workers either, but also includes technical workers and some managers. During the crisis 10 years ago, it was only a few months after these workers had to leave their jobs that they could return and find some kind of work to make a living. But it seems very unlikely we will see a recurrence of this type of situation.

As the pandemic brings all these pressures to bear upon workers' lives, they also face shrinking wages and wildly increasing prices for everyday goods. It is worth comparing again to 2009. In February of that year, the national consumer price index (CPI) fell 1.6% year-on-year, and continued to fall until October 2009. Meanwhile, workers' income (based on the minimum wage), had been increasing since 2005. However, in 2019 the CPI had already been increasing, and in February 2020 the national year-on-year CPI had increased by 5.2%. In that same period the price of food had risen even more dramatically, up by 21.9% year-on-year. While there was a slight decline during March and April, we still find an increase of 18.9% and 14.3% respectively.[24] Based on the perspectives of manufacturing workers (especially frontline workers) who we've been in touch with, real incomes have not been increasing for the past 4-5 years due to declining pay conditions and reductions in overtime. So we can see that the CPI has soared since 2019, especially the price of food. These conditions have put even further strain on the already stressed pockets of workers.

In sum, the impact of job losses and declining real incomes on workers' lives is much greater than before. Each of these factors has increased the hesitancy and concern of workers to act and has repressed the beginning of a renewed period of struggle. However, the willingness of Chinese workers, particularly those in the PRD who have fought directly before has not changed. Viewed from another perspective: given the seriousness of the conditions and the caution that workers will take in planning collective actions, the result will likely be that their resistance becomes better organised.

Source [Chuang](#).

Notes

[1] Source: QÜ²§ sêl " L "äilo/
w,ždø" ñ3Ø- „äix?L" ,U-w

•lí <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/9dIJWGaUqdUWquw8aZhFmw>

[2] "Schedule for national provinces to restart work and production! Twenty-eight provinces and cities make adjustments, 35 national and provincial level documents enclosed!" hý åšööh 28* Z† t D35ýý¶ ý†ö
https://www.sohu.com/a/370889425_120059183; "More delayed return-to-work notices issued across the country again! Updated resumption of work in the provinces and cities, extended to March 16 at the latest!"
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[3] "Return to work by province and city" hý å—öö <https://dy.163.com/v2/article/detail/F6RD180305372X4V.html>

[4] "Measures taken in Shenzhen and Chengdu: all neighborhoods are on lock-down! In case of positive results whole building sealed off for 14 days" ñ3 ýúK† @ : íj nÊt*UC|"»14)
<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1657948948641073181&wfr=spider&for=pc>; "Company quarantined due to coronavirus case discovered in an office building in Guangzhou" •P T™W|ú°° °ŽnÊÄ< hlø«"»
<http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2020-02-16/doc-iimxxstf1751231.shtml>

[5] "Administrative detention" is contrasted with "criminal detention" depending on the classification of the crime of which the prisoner is accused, roughly corresponding to the distinction between civil and criminal law in some other countries, although in China the difference is often more political, with suspected dissidents usually placed under criminal detention.

[6] "Businesses illegally return to work early during pandemic prevention and control period, check!"
«Å2§ ô ÝÄÐMå å https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_5858030

[7] "What cities and provinces are currently implementing a two week isolation period before returning to work" îMê) ÔåÔ— •"»14)
<http://www.wuhan.com/xinwen/39967.html>

[8] "China's major labour exporting provinces and cities open special trains to help migrant workers return to work across provinces" -ý *3i"ú' f .@æ åè Ô—

[9] "Apple's anxiety behind the 300 yuan-a-day recruitment rush" 300 C),,ø° ì /ùæ,,&Q
<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1660696997818355674&wfr=spider&for=pc>

[10] Long Xiaodong, "Under Worker Pressure, Foxconn Provides Restitution for Lost Vacation Pay", Weixin, 29 February 2020. <<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/lloUonAR...>>

[11] TRANSLATOR: Many Chinese companies' wage systems are fairly complicated and localized to that particular company. Often, various "points" systems are used to calculate workers' final wages in addition to their base salary. This is similar to a productivity or performance "bonus" being added, but with the "bonus" often being a substantial portion of their final income. Conceptually, it's most similar to working on a commission system in sales or relying on tips in the service industry, but translated into the factory production context.

- [12] "Investigating the 'Rights Abuse' at BYD: Employees' wages for February are a mere 300 yuan, while the company just received a 2.3 billion stimulus," ifeng, 24 March, 2020. <<http://finance.ifeng.com/c/7v6tEvevja4>>
- [13] Long Xiaodong, "After protests at several electronics factories in Longhua: What is the result?", Weixin, 20 March 2020. <<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/lnUiAYCp...>>
- [14] "Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security's best practices in the workplace with regard to the novel coronavirus epidemic", Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People's Republic of China, 23 January 2020. <<http://www.mohrss.gov.cn/SYrlzyhshb...>>
- [15] "Ningbo Comprehensive Plan for Prevention and Control: Guaranteeing Harmonious and Stable Labour Relations during the Pandemic", Zhejiang Province Human Resources and Social Security Department, 17 March 2020, <<http://www.zjhrss.gov.cn/art/2020/3...>>
- [16] "Key overseas parts suppliers halt production, revealing the Chinese auto industry's long-standing bottleneck", Baidu, 11 May 2020, <<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=16...>> ; Jia Linwei and Huang Shan, "With foreign orders dropping precipitously, what can bosses in the clothing sector do aside from halting production and laying off workers?", Sina, 02 April 2020. <<https://fashion.sina.com.cn/s/in/20...>>
- [17] "Notice: Because of declining orders due to the pandemic situation, work and production will be halted for 6-9 months!", Kuaibao, 29 March 2020. <<https://kuaibao.qq.com/s/20200329A0...>>
- [18] "Foxconn: Mandatory Overtime, Reduced Salaries and No More Overtime", QQ News, 07 May 2020. <<https://new.qq.com/omn/20200507/202...>>
- [19] According to the relevant law, social insurance taxes are supposed to be withheld from an employee's pay each month and transferred to the Social Insurance Department. Moreover, if the employee's wages are lowered upon their return from time off, the amount they pay in social insurance taxes should be lowered to a comparable degree.
- [20] TRANSLATOR: The original Chinese reads DÑp-Â. The implication here is that the company was dependent on a complicated chain of financial transactions, and when one link in that chain shattered, it broke the company's overall cash flow. Reading the sources cited here, and other related stories about the factory closure, it appears that this Hong Kong-owned firm would use its regular big orders received from Europe as collateral to secure loans to fund production, many of which used the local government (not that of Dongguan city, it seems, but the even more local government of Chashan Town, within the city) as the ultimate guarantor of the loan. This is one reason that the municipal authorities got involved so early and directly in the case. In general, this is also a good example of the fragile financial character and generally low profitability of many firms such as this, a typical old-style Pearl River Delta factory, financed from Hong Kong and clearly reliant on collusion with local government officials who may have originally had some sort of family ties to the original investors.
- [21] "Well-known old toy factory in Dongguan goes out of business, the employees seek payment and are assaulted" ž L©w, í Xâ“a«S, - ©wQ , 25 March 2020, <http://news.ctoy.com.cn/show-35675.html>
- [22] For a summary, see: "Latest Update: Well-Known Firms going Bankrupt due to the Pandemic!", CBF Trade Focus, 13 May 2020. <<https://dy.163.com/article/FCGK7SDN...>>

[23] "How high is China's unemployment rate?" -y1 ‡ Ø Macroeconomic policy report •ÂVe ~¥J, Zhongtai Securities -ðÁ8, 24 April 2020.

[24] Data sources: National Bureau of Statistics ýŕŕŕ@~Q, <http://data.stats.gov.cn/ks.htm?cn=A01&zb=A1201>; ýŕŕŕ@ãû2020t2 ýCPIŒPPIpn, Sina Finance, 11 March 2020, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/money/future/roll/2020-03-11/doc-iimxyqvz9563625.shtml>; ?è•B 0Æ sèi-Ø" 3•Ñ>4öe4, RQ, 14 March 2020, <http://news.ynet.com/2020/03/14/2452357t70.html>

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