

## *Book Review*

Chan, Chris King-chi (2010) *The Challenge of Labour in China: Strikes and the Changing Labour Regime in Global Factories*. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge. ISBN: 978-0-4155-5703-0.

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The Honda workers' strike in 2010 has drawn immense attention, global and local, to the working conditions and trade union reform in China. Labour strikes bypassing the party-led All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) to demand higher wages have not stopped in 2011 and 2012 (CLB, 2012), though they have received less foreign media attention. Strikes have become an increasingly vital means through which Chinese workers facing capitalist exploitation safeguard their interests.

Chan's book *The Challenge of Labour in China* (2010) serves as a good point of departure to grasp the development of strikes and the labour regime in China. From the late 1970s onward, contends Chan, massive industrial relocations from developed countries to developing countries with a cheap and unorganized labour force took place. Organized labour in the West was seriously attacked by the state and the capital, and with the rise of a wide diversity of social movements, labour is increasingly not seen as an important force in bringing about social changes. As a consequence, labour studies with a strong class emphasis began to be regarded as outdated in the West. Post-Marxist, post-structuralist and post-modern theories then rose to the centre of social science after the 1970s. Chan elaborates the weaknesses of these kind of 'post-' theories in grasping the transformation of labour policies and labour relations in contemporary China, while crediting their contribution to the understanding of the formation of workers' solidarity by suggesting that it should not be taken as structurally determined.

In his book, Chan traces back to the 1970s to explore how the pattern of labour conflict has changed over time in China by focussing on the example of the city of Shenzhen. He also critically examines the transformation of the broader labour relations and labour policies in the country during 2004 to 2008. This period was marked by an escalation of foreign direct investment following China's entry to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), serious labour shortages, an emerging pattern of workers' strikes, a new momentum of unionisation campaigns by ACFTU, and a wave of labour legislation (including the Labour Contract Law in 2008, the Employment Promotion Law, the Labour Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Law in 2007 to pacify the growing labour unrest). Against this larger socio-political and economic context, Chan analyzes three ethnographic cases on labour strikes that fought for higher wages and better working conditions in Shenzhen. His anatomy illuminates how the factors of original-dwelling-place, gender, age and levels of skill are exploited by the management as mechanisms of oppression, yet at the same time they exert positive influences on the creation of class solidarity and resistance. Also, Chan meticulously demonstrates how strikers mobilize

various economic, cultural, and organizational resources in their strikes. The role of international civil society in supporting Chinese workers' struggles is also highlighted.

Elaborating the impact of Chinese workers' strikes, Chan argues that they influence labour regulations and policies as much as the latter shapes workplace relations. Labour strikes have posed significant challenges to the central and local government, ACFTU as well as global capital. Capital has responded to these challenges with work intensification, production relocation and outsourcing and so forth. The local governments have reacted with better enforcement of labour regulations and a steady increase of minimum wage rates, while the central government has initiated a new round of labour legislation, including the Labour Contract Law in 2008, to better protect workers' rights and interests. And the official ACFTU is under stronger pressure from the party-state to reform itself by extending its coverage in the workplace. Drawing on Burawoy's conception of labour regime (1979), Chan elucidates the changing power relations in the workplace and argues that the labour regime in China is currently a form of 'contested despotism'.

Chan's elucidation of the development of strikes and the contested despotic labour regime in China is insightful. And his argument that workers' struggles shape labour regulations and policies is well illustrated. However, no light is shed on the impacts of strikes on the long term industrial relations in the enterprises wherein strikes break out. For example, to what degree has workplace collective negotiation been better implemented after the strike? Have strikes led to an increase in the institutional power of labour at the workplace? Have workplace representative mechanisms improved after the strike? Have enterprise trade unions become more accountable to their members? The pre and post-strike comparison of workplace labour relations will not only help us evaluate the extent to which the associational power of strikers has been translated into institutional workplace power; it will also enable us to identify the obstacles to strengthening workers' status in the workplace.

## REFERENCES

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