

## Book Review

**Fan Shigang (2018) *Striking to Survive. Workers' Resistance to Factory Relocations in China*. Chicago: Haymarket Books. ISBN 978-1608469093. 190 pp. Paperback \$16.95.**

*Reviewed by*  
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The book *Striking to Survive* by Fan Shigang documents two cases of migrant workers' struggles in South China's Pearl River Delta (PRD) between 2013 and 2015, a period in which the overall economic slowdown, rising production costs and the state's industrial upgrading policies led to a large wave of factory relocations in the so-called "workshop of the world". Since late 2012, thousands of manufacturing facilities in cities such as Shenzhen and Dongguan have closed and relocated to cheaper areas within the PRD, to China's inland provinces as well as to lower-cost countries in Asia. Based on workers' oral histories of strikes at two factories that supply to multinational corporations such as Walmart and Uniqlo, the book vividly illustrates how migrant workers in the PRD are fighting to defend their legal rights during this ongoing process of industrial restructuring.

By documenting cases of labour unrest through strike participants' own words, *Striking to Survive* differs from most of the available studies on labour militancy among China's currently estimated 290 million internal migrants. It marks the second book-length translation of worker narratives collected by Fan Shigang and a group of fellow worker-activists who have been publishing oral histories of working conditions and strike experiences in the PRD in the underground Chinese magazine *Factory Stories (Gongchang Longmenzhen)*.<sup>1</sup> The largely complementary first book *China on Strike*, published in 2016, documented the first two cycles of migrant workers' struggles in the PRD dating from about 2004 to 2007 and from 2010 to 2011 (Ren, Li and Friedman, 2016). *Striking to Survive* looks at the more recent past and focuses on what the *Factory Stories* group refer to as the "third wave" of migrant labour unrest, the cycle of struggles from late 2012 to 2016 that were predominantly sparked by factory relocations.

The book also stands out from typical academic publications on Chinese labour activism because of its much more practical concern and explicit political standpoint. The Chinese edition, Fan highlights in the book's original preface, was intended to provide "a reference for workers engaged in collective action, so that they can better navigate their own conflicts" (p. 14). A key incentive for translating the book, we learn from the excellent introduction to the English edition written by Pun Ngai and Sam Austin, has been to "challenge the anti-Chinese and essentially nationalist narrative of protectionism common among both right and left wings of the political spectrum in the United States and beyond, and in its place to foster an awareness of what workers of all countries share in common – including experiences of resistance that might

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<sup>1</sup> The largest collection of English translations from *Factory Stories* is available on the website <http://www.gongchao.org/en/factory-stories>. For additional background information on the group, see <http://chuangcn.org/journal/one/the-future-is-hidden-within-these-realities> (last accessed 4 April 2020).

provide lessons for workers elsewhere” (pp. 2–3).

The main body of the book consists of nine workers’ accounts of a single collective action at a Hong Kong owned furniture manufacturer in the PRD in 2013. Not long after the factory owner had announced his intention to merge the plant with its subsidiary in a neighbouring city, the several hundred employees went on strike. Unwilling to relocate, the workers blocked a machinery moving truck from leaving the factory premises and put forward a list of demands centered around their legal right to severance pay. The collective action, which lasted for more than twenty days, involved three rounds of negotiations between workers’ delegates and the owner’s lawyers. Furious about the factory owner’s aggressive stance and his repeated refusal to pay the expected amount of compensation, the striking workers engaged in several road blockages as well as two sit-ins at local government offices that led to violent clashes with riot police. Ultimately, the strike was unsuccessful. After a large group of workers, including the most vocal workers’ delegate, were violently attacked and detained by police during a collective protest march to the municipal government, they were unable to further sustain their resistance.

In the appendix of the book, Fan documents a comparable series of two strikes at a Hong Kong owned garment factory in Shenzhen between December 2014 and July 2015. Prior to the first strike in December, the roughly 800 mostly female employees had become increasingly dissatisfied with their decreasing wages and worried about an imminent relocation of the factory. Some of the more militant female workers sought assistance from a labour non-governmental organisation (NGO) and, as the owner denied any intention to relocate, they started to mobilise around the issue of unpaid pensions and housing funds. After a letter with demands was ignored by management, the workers took strike action and prevented the shipment of goods from the factory. Nine days into the strike, the employer relied on local police units to force the workers back to the shop floor. While he promised to raise the wages and to compensate for unpaid housing funds, the issue of unpaid pension funds remained unresolved. The second strike started the following June, after the actual relocation of the factory to another industrial park had begun. The workers demanded severance pay, occupied the factory and went to petition at various local government offices. Local police again intervened and repeatedly detained large numbers of workers. Terrified about the increasing extent of repression, some workers accepted the factory owner’s offer of a seniority-based payment much lower than the legally stipulated compensation. More than one month after it had started, the strike dissolved.

By documenting these two cases of collective action, *Striking to Survive* provides several important contributions to the growing literature on the changing characteristics of migrant labour unrest in South China. First, in highlighting the militancy of older workers in their 40s and 50s as well as the prevalence of demands centered around severance pay and social insurance, the documented factory relocation strikes confirm other studies in recent years that had pointed to a change in the composition of strike participants and demands. The oral histories vividly show what is at stake for this older generation of migrant workers, most of whom remain excluded from existing social insurance schemes: Not only have many migrants settled down with their families and friends close to the factories where they had often worked for over a decade, but it has also become increasingly difficult for workers above the age of 40 to find another factory job in cities such as Shenzhen and Dongguan. Second, and this is the biggest strength of *Striking to Survive*, the worker narratives allow for a rare degree of first-hand insights into the process and challenges of organising and sustaining strike action without any trade union support. The book foregrounds how workers at various positions within the factory, with different seniority levels and personal backgrounds, experienced and shaped the struggles. More specifically, it illustrates

the complex relationships between foremen and common workers, and it critically examines the actions of selected workers' delegates as well as the difficulties in establishing participatory forms of collective decision-making. In addition, the oral histories also shed light on the specific role of female strike participants, workers' attitudes towards the legal system, and the limited capacity of labour NGOs in influencing the direction and outcome of strikes. Third, the book is a valuable resource for understanding how striking migrant workers perceive and cope with the agency of various state institutions. By demonstrating the local government's readiness to criminalise activist workers, the experiences depicted in *Striking to Survive* are consistent with existing studies that have highlighted a more coercive approach towards striking workers and labour NGOs since 2012.

Compared to the many labour scholars who have highlighted an increasing empowerment of China's migrant workers over the past two decades, Fan Shigang holds on to a rather pessimistic tone in his overall analytical assessment of the wave of factory relocation strikes. This is understandable given, for instance, the unsuccessful outcomes of the two documented strike movements and the persistent lack of any form of more stable networks among striking workers. It remains questionable, however, whether Fan's characterisation of these strikes as "spontaneous" (pp. 10, 180) is helpful in making sense of the ways in which workers in the PRD have developed their organising skills and negotiation strategies. Furthermore, especially for readers unfamiliar with the topic, the book might have been improved by providing more historical context and by relating the characteristics of the strike cases more closely to the findings in other existing studies. These, however, are only minor points of criticism for an important and highly informative book that deserves a large audience extending well beyond the confines of academia. *Striking to Survive* is recommended reading for anyone concerned with labour activism and the Chinese working class.

## REFERENCE

Hao Ren, Zhongjin Li and Eli Friedman (eds.) (2016) *China on Strike. Narratives of Workers' Resistance*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

DANIEL FUCHS is a research and teaching fellow at the Institute for Asian and African Studies at the Humboldt University of Berlin. In his PhD thesis, based on fourteen months of fieldwork in Chengdu and Chongqing, he has examined the characteristics of migrant labour unrest in the context of industrial relocation to Southwestern China. Most recently, he has co-edited two special issues on China's political economy under Xi Jinping for the *Austrian Journal of Development Studies*. [Email: [dan.fuchs@hu-berlin.de](mailto:dan.fuchs@hu-berlin.de)]