

China's workers are stirring

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HONG KONG After 30 years of reform and spectacular economic growth, the cracks are beginning to show.

The workers who have created China's economic miracle are tiring of being treated like cogs in a machine, working long hours in dangerous conditions for derisory pay. They are now saying enough is enough, staging strikes and protests across the country to demand not just their basic legal rights but a better standard of living, better working conditions and a better future.

Strikes and worker protests are not new in China. In the manufacturing heartland, the Pearl River Delta, there are up to 10,000 labor disputes each year. Indeed, back in the spring of 2008, a high-ranking local union official described strikes as "as natural as argu-

ments between a husband and wife."

But what we are seeing now is an intensive phase of worker activism that reflects the rapid recovery of the

Workers have been left out of China's economic miracle, and they're saying enough is enough.

Chinese economy and, more importantly, the failure of the government to tackle the fundamental issues that give rise to these disputes: low pay, the lack of formal channels for worker grievances and demands, and the exclusion of

migrant workers from education, health care and social services in the cities.

Ever since the Chinese government introduced the minimum wage in 2004, the majority of factory owners have used that legal minimum as the basic wage for their production-line workers.

This would not be a problem if the minimum wage was a living wage, but in many Chinese cities it is anything but. The minimum wage levels in three of China's most expensive cities — Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen — have just been increased to about 1,100

yuan per month (\$160), but this is still not nearly enough. As a Foxconn worker in Shenzhen told a local journalist: "I can earn 1,500 yuan a month with overtime. But after rent, food and clothing, I don't have a cent left."

Many factory workers have to put in more than 60 hours of overtime each month just to get by, performing the same robotic task 12 hours a day, six days a week. No one can stand this mind-numbing and dehumanizing work.

But how can there be change when the workers have no formal channel for their demands and grievances? The trade union at these factories, if there is one, is a hostage to management and will never take the side of the workers in a dispute. Workers have no option but to take matters into their own hands and stage

strikes and protests in the hope that the local government, which abhors social instability, will intercede on their behalf.

Some young workers at Foxconn, feeling alone and desperate and seeing no hope for the future, have taken their own lives. Many of the workers at Honda are demanding a genuinely representative union. Strange as it might seem, this could be the answer for management at Honda and Foxconn and factories across China.

Such a union at Foxconn would not only be able to negotiate a decent basic wage, it could also foster a sense of community that would help protect the rights and dignity of all employees. At Honda's supplier factories, a properly functioning trade union would have been able to present workers' demands for higher pay to management at scheduled, peaceful and equal negotiations, and thereby forestall strike action.

Even the Communist Party boss of Guangdong, Wang Yang, now thinks proper trade unions are essential if workers' rights are to be protected. In a telephone conference to discuss the recent strikes in the province last week, he said unions should stand up for workers.

It is not just the trade unions that have to make changes. Local governments have a crucial and long-overdue adjustment to make. For decades now, city governments have been collecting

billions of yuan in taxes from companies that employ workers from outside the city limits. Yet these migrant workers have received nothing in return. They are excluded from housing, health care and social services, and their children are excluded from local schools. Until very recently, they could not even cash in their employer's social security contributions when they left the city to move back home.

Some urban governments have made grudging concessions to migrant workers, but most will open their schools and hospitals only to those with relatively well paid and steady jobs. Migrants who really need help are still systematically excluded.

The time has come for city governments across China to repay the debt owed to the migrant workers. Local governments should build low-cost housing for workers, and migrants should be given the same rights to local social services as urban residents — no questions asked.

The final goal should be the eradication of the term "migrant worker" entirely. Workers are workers, no matter where they come from, and they should all be treated with dignity and respect, and at the very least get decent pay for decent work.

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