

Chapter 4

Chinese migrant workers: factors constraining the emergence of class consciousness¹

Anita Chan and Kaxton Siu

Labour protests in China, particularly among the so-called ‘new generations of peasant-workers’ (*xinshengdai nongmingong*),² have been increasing during the past decade. Every time an explosive strike breaks out and receives publicity outside China, it stirs up excitement among labour sympathizers. Great expectations are sometimes placed on the disturbances, in the belief that it heralds a rising consciousness of collective interests among workers. Is this indeed the case? These workers are young, fresh from the countryside, heading straight from the fields into factories that are usually located in new industrial zones cut off from urban areas. This does not at first sight seem a likely group to exhibit any collective identity. Is this new generation indeed developing a strong working class consciousness?

Exponents of the thesis that migrant workers are developing class consciousness do not contend that this is yet at a high level. Even scholars such as Ngai Pun and Huilin Lu (2010), who optimistically point to the migrant workers’ potential to mount collective challenges, still characterize ‘the second generation of peasant-workers’, who are seen as more conscious than the first generation, as ‘*gradually* [our emphasis] becoming aware of its class position.’³ Indeed, at a conference held at Vienna in September 2011, Pun cautioned that it would be a long time before there would be a massive upheaval (Pun 2010). In this chapter we come to the same conclusion, though arriving at it from a different angle. We hope to put forth a different understanding of the present class consciousness of the millions of Chinese migrant workers in South China by drawing on Marx, Lenin, and Marxist historians’ view of

history.

Class and class consciousness: theory and methodology

Extant studies of China's migrant workers tend to be ahistorical in that they either describe phenomena that took place at one point in time or within a few short decades. Eli Friedman and Ching Kwan Lee in their recent article (Friedman and Lee, 2010), and Chris Chan (2010) in his new book on migrant-worker strikes, start with the late 1980s in their depictions of the development of identity and consciousness among this group. Historically, the formation of class, the emergence of class consciousness, labour movements and social movements have taken a much longer time span to take full shape. 'Fernand Braudel (1982) of The Annales School and world-system theorist Immanuel Wallerstein (1991) considered even several decades as too short to understand and predict social change. As yet, there is no labour historian in Chinese studies, so we shall attempt to place these last thirty years into a historical perspective by examining the class formation that occurred during the European industrial revolution two centuries back. We believe that by situating China's current level of class and class consciousness development as a historical process we shall arrive at a more accurate understanding of the current situation and what lies ahead in the coming several decades.

While a large social group with shared socio-economic conditions can structurally and objectively be identifiable as a class, subjectively they may not identify themselves as a class. Marx wrote of the peasantry in 1852, 'In so far as there is merely a local interaction among these small peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no unity, no national union and no political organization, they do not form a class' (Marx, 1963, p. 124). This brings us to Marx's famous distinction between 'class in itself' and 'class for itself' of industrial workers:

Economic conditions first transformed the mass of the people of the country

into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. The mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, the mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle (Marx 1995, p. 188–9).

Most scholars' writings on Chinese migrant workers have not argued that today's workers have yet become a 'class for itself,' but they have not teased out in depth the level of class consciousness thus far attained by this enormous new-born labouring group. This brings to the fore the necessity of examining varying levels of class consciousness in the progression from no consciousness to political consciousness.

How does a working class transform itself from a 'class in itself' to a 'class for itself'? In Europe, this was a historical process that took many decades. It was a linear progression interrupted by fits and starts. The development could be divided into stages and, within each stage, into phases. Both Marx (1963) and Lenin (1947) wrote about this staged development of consciousness. Marx observed that in the beginning workers' strikes were isolated and were mainly over wage maintenance. After some time they united across factories in an effort to counter the strength of the capitalist employers. Finally, when consciousness was high, workers even used some of their wages to support workers' organizations. They had progressed to be 'a class for itself'.

Lenin divided class consciousness into three different levels: individual consciousness, trade union consciousness and social democratic (meaning revolutionary) consciousness. E.P. Thompson theorized the fluidity of class and class consciousness further as a process that became 'a historical phenomenon'. 'I do not see class as 'structure', or even as a 'category', he wrote, 'but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships' (Thompson 1966, p. 9).

As class and class consciousness are historical phenomena, the time frame used

is important in understanding the level of class consciousness. In 1845, about 65 years after the emergence of industrial labour, Engels expected that the English working class would rise up in rebellion, but it did not. Engels' too optimistic expectation was based on the biggest workers' uprising in English history, which took place between 1841 and 1842. In this two-year period there were many waves of strikes. Royle notes that about 70 000 miners went on strike at 8 Scottish and 14 English counties, for the most part in the Midlands, Lancashire, Cheshire, Yorkshire, and the Strathclyde region of Scotland. Many Chartist activists, i.e., activists advocating political change, joined in this strike wave (Royle 1996, p. 30) and the Chartist movement. The maturation of working class political consciousness flowered in this period. After this countrywide strike, Engels had to wait until 1853 – three-quarters of a century after the start of the Industrial Revolution – for the next uprising, when 18 000 textile factory workers went on strike in Stockport, Lancashire, Cheshire and Preston, demanding pay rises to keep up with the high inflation of that year (Pelling 1976, pp. 35–6). In Russia, industrial development began only in the second half of the 1860s, and it was about three decades later that Lenin argued in 'What's to be Done?' that workers' class consciousness would not rise beyond spontaneity unless given a push by an intellectual vanguard (Lenin 1947). Thus, Marx, Engels, Lenin and many labour historians were impatient about how slowly class consciousness matured. There was an urge to will this historical phenomenon into being and Lenin, impatient, ultimately put his organizational prescription into practice and tried to create history – as did Mao, following in Lenin's footsteps.

At what stage and phase of development is the consciousness of the new Chinese migrant working class? What timeframe should be used when studying the development of their class consciousness? In responding to these two questions, we will try to survey the development of class consciousness of Chinese migrant workers in Guangdong province and contrast such a development with that in other countries (for example, England and Russia) in order to locate the current level of class consciousness possessed by Chinese migrant workers. On top of this, we also use various empirical cases which have broken out in China to delineate the progression and level of class

consciousness among Chinese migrant workers at various points in time. Notably, among all the cases presented, we pay particular attention to the Nanhai Honda strike that broke out in 2010, and evaluate its significance in terms of the level of class consciousness it suggests, using other cases as reference points. However, before going further into the details of our cases, several points have to be emphasized: the main purpose of this chapter is to re-mobilize Marx and Lenin's theoretical staged development of consciousness to *objectively* measure the level of class consciousness possessed by the present-day migrant workers in Southern China. There is *no* intention to suggest any advocacy plans; *nor* is there any intention to demand today's Chinese migrant workers to raise their consciousness up to a revolutionary level; *nor* do we want to use other strike cases to downplay the role of the Nanhai Honda strike in contemporary Chinese labour movement history. However we are sceptical that its impact on workers has been that great and that the strikers possessed very high class consciousness. Our major argument in this article is simply that the majority of present-day Chinese migrant workers are still waging isolated and uncoordinated rights-based protests and strikes. Only a few strikes have gone beyond rights-based demands to an interest-based level by requesting more than what is stipulated in current Chinese labour law. Only very few Chinese migrant workers are class conscious enough to ask for the setting up or re-election of workplace trade unions, or to organize strikes at regional and country-wide levels, or beyond individual factories.

The embryonic stage of class consciousness of Chinese migrants in Guangdong

Beginning in the mid-1980's the migrant workers in the factories of Guangdong province grew from a very small number to reach some 30 million today. This is probably the fastest-growing and largest rural-to-urban factory workforce, closely packed into one geographical region, created in human history. To a great extent the birth of this industrial workforce resembles the birth of the industrial workforce in England and other parts of Western Europe at the end of the 18th and the beginning of

the 19th Centuries. Much can be learned by comparing these two new-born labouring groups that existed 200 years apart. Using empirical evidence, this section argues that the class consciousness among the several tens of millions of migrant workers in Guangdong province is still at a low level when measured against the workers of the industrial revolution from the turn of the 19th Century to the 1840s.

Evidence from both periods rests partly on an examination of the types and levels of protests. These can range from quiet and orderly deliveries of signed petitions to Luddite behaviour. Among the many forms of protest, the most significant manifestation of collective consciousness is strikes – workers refusing to sell their labour, resulting in open confrontation between labour and capital.

What is the evidence for strike actions within China today? Unfortunately, Chinese provincial governments do not release strike figures but only figures for ‘labour disputes’, which are statistics on court cases, and should not be equated to strike figures.⁴ Unless local authorities report strikes to the relevant centralized statistics-collecting bureaucracies, a strike does not become a statistical figure. Chinese local governments have a tendency to under-report strikes to maintain a façade of social stability. In addition, there are many mini-strikes or work stoppages that only last for an hour or half a day and are resolved quickly, unknown to the local authorities. Thus, the available data on strikes are patchy to the point of being useless.

However, lack of information has not deterred scholars interested in the topic. A lot of emphasis gets placed on one or two strike cases⁵ or even on one individual worker as evidence of rising class consciousness (Pun & Lu 2010). These cases do reflect in some detail the work conditions and protest actions at the sites in question, but to conclude that consciousness is rising rapidly and spreading among the broad migrant workforce, or that there have been strike waves, cannot be backed by evidence.

The most systematic attempt to document the history of strikes in the Pearl River Delta region is by Chris Chan, who in a chapter of his 2010 book gives a sweeping record of strikes in Shenzhen from 1986 to 2004 (C. Chan 2010, pp. 18–24). He explains the ebb and flow of strikes based on the cases he collected, showing workers’

responses to the micro- and macro-economic situation of the time. The thrust of his argument is that strikes increased. But Chris Chan has not taken into account strike density, that is, the proportion of strikes in relation to the size of the workforce. As the number of foreign-invested factories in China has expanded from a small number in the county town of Shenzhen to several tens of thousands of factories crowding the Delta in less than three decades, it is inevitable that the number of strikes has risen. Given the huge rise in the number of workers, are the recent strikes that large in number? Our comparative study of the Ho Chi Minh area of Vietnam and Guangdong in China strongly suggests that the strike density is much higher in Vietnam (A. Chan 2011).

To compensate for the dearth of reliable statistical data, in this chapter we will use data we have collected on protest and strike cases in Guangdong province stretching back for almost two decades since 1993. The sources for these 100-plus cases are varied. They include unpublished reports from several labour NGOs, published reports of several labour NGO websites based outside China⁶, internal documentation from a Shenzhen-based labour NGO, discussions with NGO staff members; our own interviews with workers who have participated in strikes, reports from Hong Kong newspapers, news articles from Guangdong newspapers and web-based reports posted by Chinese labour activists. The level of detail of the information varies: some are recorded in a few short lines, some comprise several tens of pages of interview notes and some include follow-up reports. In several cases we were able to meet with some of the strike protagonists.

As far as we know there is no empirical evidence to show that there have been any large-scale, coordinated and organized labour protests in Guangdong province, nor have groups of workers from different factories made any collective demands on the local or central Chinese governments, nor have workers attempted to set up any independent trade unions at the workplace or multi-workplace level. The protests and strikes have almost always been spontaneous and have involved very specific issues of discontent within a factory.

Pre-1994: a stage of pre-consciousness

Even today, most protests and strikes in Guangdong result from serious immediate grievances of individual workers or a small group of workers or, at the most, a sizeable number of workers at one workplace. That was even more the case two decades ago. In our view the strikes recorded by Chris Chan, which occurred at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, fall into the category of pre-class consciousness. His findings are supported by the evidence recorded in 77 private letters that we have studied. These letters were written by migrant workers to the Zhili toy factory fire victims of 1993. They were retrieved from the deceased workers' dormitory by a Chinese researcher and were passed onto one of this chapter's authors. The writers of the letters represent a random sample of migrant workers in the Guangdong region. They revealed horrendous working and living conditions in those early days of industrialization in the region's export sector. Some workers wrote to their friends and relatives at Zhili that they literally did not have enough to eat: that their wages were so low that they had to cut down on food consumption. In these letters, there was not even one expressed wish to attempt to do something to improve their plight, not to mention ideas of taking protest action. These workers accepted their fate, and the only hope they had was to find a better job in another factory, which in the end often turned out to be no better (A. Chan 2002).

Compared with today, working and living conditions 20 years ago were, as one worker cited by Chris Chan called it, an 'invisible prison' (2010, p. 29). It was very common for factory management to take away workers' identity documents and to delay paying them to prevent them from leaving, reducing them to bonded labour (A. Chan 2000). The Zhili letters, written in 1993, pre-date the enactment of China's Labour Law, which was passed in 1994. While there were regulations on maximum work hours and overtime pay before 1994, the authors of the 77 letters were not aware of these, or of any other safeguards against exploitation. They had no notion of rights, but only that their immediate individual circumstances were horrible. The period before 1994 can be considered a pre-class conscious period. The best that workers in such circumstances can do to protest their conditions is to nurture seeds of individual

hidden resistance.⁷

Post-1994: a phase of rights-based protests

The 1994 Labour Law was the first labour legislation passed in China since the founding of the People's Republic. The passage of the law stirred up a debate among government bureaucracies. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) fought to ensure that the spirit of the law was advantageous to workers. It was passed not because workers had been collectively making demands on the government, but because there was a consensus within the political elite that social stability had to be maintained by having a law to regulate industrial relations. In 19th century England, the introduction of the Reform Act in 1832, the Factory Act in 1833 and the New Poor Law in 1834 were also for the purpose of maintaining stability. The difference was that in the early 19th century England large-scale labour protests had for several decades been putting a lot of pressure on capitalists and on the state to improve working conditions. In the 1990s in China, such conscious collective demands did not exist.

The 1994 Labour Law did induce a change in workers' awareness, and migrant workers in the Guangdong region gradually began to use the law as an instrument to 'protect rights' (*weiquan*) when their legal rights were violated. Note that these rights refer to legal rights and not to inalienable human rights. The Chinese social discourse on 'rights protection' is characterized by the acceptance of prevailing laws as the standard by which work conditions and wages should be set. *Weiquan* is a hegemonic discourse deployed by the political and social elites, and from there it populates the vocabulary and consciousness of this new working class. *Weiquan* is the best tool the *dagongzu* ('toiling tribe') has to 'defend [its legal] rights'.

This slang term *zu*, meaning 'tribe' or 'ethnicity' has been accepted by the elite to describe what is in reality a 'class.' In the post-Mao era the discourse downplays the concept of class, which was an everyday word used under Maoism, so that the idea of class was expunged from social consciousness. This has played a part in constraining

the development of class consciousness among the migrant workers born in China's new 'classless' era.

The 'intellectual vanguard' of the Pearl River Delta region

When Lenin grew impatient that proletarian class consciousness was developing too slowly to stage a revolution, he proclaimed that the workers needed a 'revolutionary vanguard' drawn from the intelligentsia to quicken the historical process. China's revolutionary vanguard was the Chinese Communist Party led by Mao. Since the economic reforms several Hong Kong labour NGOs have come into Guangdong's Pearl River Delta to fill the place of the 'intelligentsia' of yesteryear, but by no means are they Lenin's and Mao's 'revolutionaries.'

The Hong Kong labour NGOs, usually staffed by a few people, began setting up offices across the border in the mid-1990s. These NGOs, run by mostly middle-class, young idealists and hired PRC Chinese staff, have played a significant role in popularizing the idea of 'rights protection' among Chinese migrant workers in the Shenzhen region.⁸ Their programmes focused on raising awareness of the details of the Labour Law and laws related to safety among migrant workers. They taught migrant workers how to read their pay slips and pointed out where the payment and work hours fell short of legal requirements. They helped injured workers seek compensation, which requires an expert understanding of how to assess grades of injuries and litigation procedures. This strategy allowed them to establish a foothold among workers' communities. They were accepted by the Chinese local authorities because their free services were in tune with the new laws. These activities became legitimate and were tolerated as China became increasingly legislated. With time these NGOs became better organized, trained more mainland staff and ran more train-the-trainer programs. As staff members split off to form splinter groups, an increasing number of indigenous labour NGOs sprang up in the Delta region.

Their persistence paid off within the space of a decade. Most migrant workers today in this part of China know about the legal maximum overtime, about the region's

official minimum wage and about industrial injuries compensation. Taking bosses to court for underpaying, going to the authorities to lodge legal claims for back pay and suing for injuries compensation have become commonplace. Litigation is a legitimate form of protest. These paralegals and lawyers of labour law firms have come to be known as 'citizens' agents'. One well-known citizens' agent handled 6000 cases in a decade and a half ('Labour NGOs ...' 2008). The rise of litigation and of citizens' agents has catapulted China's industrial relations into a new phase. In response, the Guangdong government has had to grapple with the question of whether it should co-opt and incorporate the citizens' agents and other labour NGOs by taking them under its wing.

While the NGOs' legal aid movement has been instrumental in raising workers' awareness of their labour rights, the very fact that the movement is framed by the discourse on 'rights protection' individualizes labour dispute settlements in a reactive, rather than proactive, manner. That is, only when labour rights are being violated and, specifically, when minimal legal rights are being violated, do workers come forth. China is headed in a direction that is becoming increasingly litigious, interrupted sporadically by industrial violence. This 'intellectual vanguard' of rights protectors delimits itself to the law-abiding activities of individual litigation. While not intending to belittle their efforts, we think that they have actually helped to alleviate social discontent by channelling workers' grievances into the legal system, which is exactly why the legal instruments were created in the first place.

Rights-based protests versus interest-based protests

It is instructive to introduce the difference here between rights-based as opposed to interest-based protests. Rights-based demands push for legal compliance when legal rights are being violated. In this sense, the law imposes a maximum on claims – these can be no more than the minimum standards that the law requires. Interest-based demands go beyond the minimum standards defined by law: for example, a demand for a wage rise above the legal minimum wage. Thus, the issue at stake in interest-

based claims is not one of legality, but of whether management chooses to accept or resist workers' demands.

This distinction between the two types of rights can only exist when the standards set by the labour laws are recognized as a legitimate framework for regulating labour relations. Thus Chinese migrant workers, in taking the litigation route, have not questioned the legitimacy of this structure. They have not reached the level of consciousness at which they could assert their rights to what is beyond the legal minimum. It can be said that since the implementation of the Labour Law their level of consciousness has not progressed very far. In fact, in our comparative study of the labour laws of China and Vietnam as regulatory regimes, Chinese migrant workers lag behind their Vietnamese counterparts. The several thousand strikes that have broken out in Vietnam since 2005 were mostly interest-based strikes. The law to them is irrelevant: every single one of these Vietnamese strikes violated the detailed strike procedures laid down in Article 14 of the Vietnamese Labour Code. In contrast, Chinese migrant workers' demands are normally rights-based. This is evidenced by Ching Kwan Lee's assertion, in *Against the Law: Labour Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt*, that she found 'that migrant workers ... see the Labour Law as the only institutional resource protecting their interests vis-à-vis powerful employers and local officials' (Lee 2007, p. 160). Migrant workers in this part of China work *with* the law and not *against* the law.

However, the consciousness of Vietnamese workers is also not high when compared with European workers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Two hundred years ago in Europe, workers again and again staged mass protests to spur the enactment of new laws. In other words, at that time the concept of two types of protest – rights-based and interest-based – did not exist. Labour Laws then were in the making, pushed into being in part through workers' actions. In the early 19th century, as workers emerged out of an agrarian society, the concept of a maximum number of work hours a day for paid labour did not exist. As Marx's historical survey on the *corvée* system reveals, some landlords forced peasants to work 365 days a year and successfully turned peasants into a form of chattel (Marx 1976, p. 348). Only later,

when workers were coerced into labouring beyond the limit of physical tolerance, did they begin to struggle for shorter work hours. Marx recorded the bitter history of struggle for shorter work hours in *Capital*. First, in 1833, it was a struggle for a 12-hour day, then for a 10-hour day in 1838, and then an 8-hour day in 1866 (Marx 1976, p. 340–411). Each struggle was a learning process that fed back into a consciousness that the workers, dispersed across workplaces, cities and regions, belonged to a socio-economic group with shared interests.

But in Marx and Lenin's conception of class, this was still a class in itself. The workers' main concern was still their physical wellbeing, as Marx pointed out. The workers' demands still revolved around narrow, non-political, immediate issues of whether long working hours would lead to casualties, or whether dangerous work in dye and bleach industries were hazardous to workers' health (Marx 1976, p. 340–411). In fact, in the early days of industrialization those leading the struggle were the labour aristocracy made up of craftsmen who considered themselves a cut above the unskilled workers and, later, as the factory system began to take root, above the factory workers. There were no legal norms to constrain the development of workers' consciousness. Factory workers inherited the experience and tradition of class struggle from the several decades of struggle staged by the labour aristocracy. In China today, the migrant factory workers have no accumulated experience to fall back on. They have to start from zero, and it will take several decades to catch up to their English counterparts of the years between 1829 and 1834, a period that historians commonly agree was the period when the English working class began to be aware of its class identity (Musson 1972, p. 21; Hobsbawm 1979, p. 4–68; Morris 1979). The conflict between employers and labour was the essential ingredient in shaping this class identity. This awareness took more than 50 years to develop after the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.

The labour laws in China today have another type of constraining effect on the development of class consciousness. In China, the political elite pass labour laws that largely are in compliance with international labour standards (except for the core labour right of freedom of association: that is, permitting independent unions). The

Chinese laws have been shaped without any input from workers. In that sense, while today's workers in the former socialist states have had it easy because they did not have to struggle for legal maximum overtime and a minimum wage, this has pre-empted and deprived them of the experience to voice their interests through collective struggle to press for laws in their favour. The contention today is whether the bosses have breached the legal standards set for them. The acceptance of the legitimacy of labour laws and of the standards set by these laws has thwarted the development of millions of workers' collective consciousness to question whether the minimum wage is set too low. Both Chinese and Vietnamese workers for the time being are only holding employers responsible for their exploitation and have not reached the level of making political demands on the state, which Marx and Engel defined as a higher stage of consciousness.

2010: the beginning of interest-based protests?

The Honda transmission plant in Nanhai, Guangdong, has been considered by a number of writers to be a watershed in workers' consciousness, rising from the phase of rights-based to interest-based agitation. Two thousand workers downed tools on 17 May 2010 and demanded a raise of 800 RMB a month – an 80 per cent increase. What was more, they insisted the increase had to be added to their basic wage rather than as a subsidy. The big increase they demanded was unprecedented, as labour protests almost always have been over unpaid overtime, wage arrears or other legal violations. In addition, they wanted a stepped wage structure. Their demands indicated an aspiration for job security, an incentive system for promotion and introduction of a seniority system. This is in line with Pun and Lu's (2010) analysis that this generation of workers do not want to return to their home villages or home towns. They want to stay and become permanent residents of Guangdong province. The workers at the Honda parts plant also complained that the salaries of the Japanese staff were too high and the gap between the Japanese and Chinese employees too wide. This was also unusual, because for the last decades migrant workers have accepted the fact that foreign staff

are on a much higher salary scale. Workers might have complained about this in private, but not as an open grievance. This was a sign that the Honda strike leaders have developed a sense that there should be a fairer distribution of income. A last demand worth noting, though by no means unprecedented, was a call for a new election of the factory's trade union committee to replace the existing ineffectual union leadership made up of management staff.

The strike lasted 19 days and ended after the intervention of several people: the CEO of the Guangzhou Automobile Group, which is the Chinese partner of the Honda assembly plant,⁹ the provincial deputy trade union chairman, and a well-known legal scholar. The workers obtained the wage rise they demanded and were promised that they would be able to elect their own trade union committee (Luthje 2010; Chan & Hui unpublished). The Honda strike and its results were well publicised, especially through the web. Within a two week period, strikes at two other Honda auto parts plants in Guangdong Province broke out. These also ended with workers winning big wage increases. In other parts of China, about a dozen or so strikes of a similar nature were reported in about the same period. It was unclear whether these latter strikes were inspired by the Nanhai Honda strikes, but this was widely assumed to be the case. The strikes that broke out in the few other Honda auto part plants were all peaceful. Within days they were able to force production at several large Honda assembly plants to grind to a halt. The losses to Honda were enormous, and this can easily explain why Honda conceded to workers' demands. In all these cases, the provincial government and the provincial and Guangzhou city trade unions intervened as mediators. These strikes attracted national and international media attention, which characterized them as signs of the beginning of serious workers' unrest. In addition, the Chinese government, the official trade union, labour NGOs, labour activists and academics all indicated that the Nanhai Honda strike elevated China's labour movement into a new stage.

The demand for a big wage rise did send alarm bells to Honda, other companies and the government, that the low-wage era might be over. That strikes in supplier factories can disrupt production chains, causing huge loss to capital-intensive industries,

was without doubt a serious cause of concern for the state and capital. These strikes, if allowed to spread, could have had ripple effects on the Chinese economy. But when we examine closely what these strikes, and the one at Nanhai Honda in particular, mean in terms of workers' class consciousness, there seems not to have been any 'breakthrough'. There are a number of reasons for this conclusion.

First, based on some inside information we were able to collect, and also based on what has happened since the strike ended, it can be said that this strike, though quite long and staged with great solidarity, was spontaneous. There was no planning, no organizing of core activists or of a strike committee. A Chinese labour activist who went to Nanhai and met with the strike leaders was surprised by the strike leaders' almost total lack of knowledge of trade unionism.¹⁰ Once satisfied that their economic demands had been met, they did not press for the immediate election of a new trade union committee. Thus, when the provincial trade union took several months to organize the first round of elections for 30 trade union representatives, workers' enthusiasm and sense of solidarity dissipated, along with their willingness to struggle for genuine representation. Divide and rule tactics by management had succeeded in planting dissensions among different groups of workers. The strike leader lost her election in a run-off vote and is now reportedly taking Japanese classes offered by the company to further her own advancement. The 30 newly elected representatives are mostly management staff, because workers did not know who to vote for. The election for the new trade union chairperson was postponed to 2011 when the term for the existing union committee expired.¹¹ This effectively means that the strike has failed to set a precedent to replace an ineffective workplace union with an effective elected one. The provincial government and trade union are intent that there should be no such precedent.¹²

Second, this strike, like those that preceded it, has not led to workers pulling together to form a sustained and stable organization through which to continue the struggle, either within the factory or beyond it. From the very beginning the strike possessed the ingredients of an ephemeral protest action. The two original strike leaders wanted to stir up a strike after they handed in their resignations to the

company. They had not built up a solid core of workers to lead the strike in the event that workers responded; there was no long term plan. Their fellow workers did respond, and after a few days, when the two leaders were fired, they just left, as they had already planned to do. This much – that they would leave the plant – was planned. When Ms. Li, a 19 year-old, took up the leadership after their departure, she was too inexperienced to take up the challenge beyond reacting to immediate circumstances.

Third, the several strikes that took place in June and July had no coordination across workplaces. Workers involved in the strike that broke out at the Honda Lock plant in Zhongshan County did not contact strikers at the Nanhai Honda plant before they began to strike.¹³ Within these two months, workers who started strikes in other parts of the country might have been inspired by what they read in the media and internet on the Honda strikes. However, the small strike wave showed no signs of coordinated, collective effort across workplaces, industries or regions. These activities remained isolated and workers' consciousness did not rise beyond immediate economic demands.

In the Nanhai Honda strike there were two important elements: workers requesting a big wage rise and a demand for re-election of the workplace trade union. The wage increase demand was unprecedented and was a clear-cut interest-based action rather than a rights-based action. To put the Nanhai Honda strike into context, we will present other strike and protest cases in Guangdong. Each of them has its own features. All of them qualify as interest-based actions. Some of them are similar to the Nanhai Honda strike in that workers asked for a substantial pay rise or for the election of a new union chair; yet some of them differ in terms of awareness of the importance of international support, scale, organization, persistence and solidarity.

The first case is V-tech, a Hong Kong electronics firm of several hundred employees in Dongguan City, Guangdong province. The V-tech case was an exemplary case of workers' commitment and willingness to up the ante. The spark that lit the fuse on the protest was that V-tech had been paying unusually low wages and suddenly laid off a large number of employees with little compensation. As early as 2000, 60 employees had signed their names to an open letter addressed to a New York-based

labour NGO, China Labour Watch, listing their company ID numbers and their telephone numbers. In an extremely emotive gesture, five representatives pressed their bloody thumbprints on a document authorizing them to be representatives. They asked China Labour Watch to ask American buyers to intervene on their behalf. Approaching the outside world was an unusual and risky move to take. It was in fact strategic, because those were the years when corporate social responsibility (CSR) was a big issue in the export sector. China Labour Watch's exposé reports of poor conditions in the supplier factories of popular brands could easily damage the brands' human rights record, and those reports became a matter of grave concern. This was a case in which the workers showed an awareness of the importance of reaching out for international support.

One of the two most important things that drew so much attention to the Nanhai Honda strike was the big pay raise for which workers dared to ask. This was a significant interest-based demand. In our research we have identified two cases in which workers demanded pay rises above the minimum wage. Information on the first is derived from an unpublished report written by a labour NGO staff member. The incident happened in September 2007. Normally each year around July the Shenzhen government announces the new minimum wage for the city, but that year the government instead told the press that they could be adjusting the minimum wage either upward or downward. Workers were already feeling the pinch of inflation that year. The announcement caused much dissatisfaction in the workforce. To pacify the workers management promised a wage adjustment, but the adjustment turned out to be unfairly distributed and too small to keep up with inflation. Workers went on strike asking for a raise from 700 RMB to 800 RMB a month. Management stood firm on 750 RMB, which was then the official minimum wage for a 40 hour-week. Workers took to the streets and several hundred police came to drive them back, and then locked them inside the factory. The (unpublished) NGO report recorded this interesting observation:

The strike in Dechang is characterized by the consciousness of a new generation of workers. Unlike workers in other enterprises where demands tend only to

revolve around paying up to the official minimum wage standard, Dechang workers realize that their wage has to keep up with inflation.

In other words, at that time the ability of migrant workers to draw a relationship between inflation and wage was considered as a new development. This NGO staff member had been a production line worker for 15 years before joining the NGO five years earlier. From experience, he was able to detect this minor but interesting difference between this strike and other strikes. The workers were only asking for a 14 per cent raise, and between their request and the company's offer, the contentious figure was a mere 7 per cent. Yet over this small amount, which translated to a difference of one or two American cents per hour, the workers faced great resistance and had to struggle harder than the Nanhai Honda workers. Though the increase asked for was pitifully little compared to the Honda workers, it is still an interest-based protest.

The second example of an interest-based strike was that staged by crane operators and truck drivers of a huge Shenzhen container port in November 2007. Both the Hong Kong and Chinese media covered the story (Zhang & Chen 2007). The interest-based nature of the protest was obvious. Dock workers were making a comparatively high wage of approximately 4000 RMB a month (admittedly after putting in a lot of overtime and for heavy work). The demand was for a raise of 25 to 50 per cent. Although they already enjoyed relatively high pay, the workers decided to ask for at least four days of rest a month and an overtime rate six times higher than the illegally low rate of 3 RMB an hour. That the strike started on 1 May was a strategic choice to select a date crying out with socialist symbolism. It was not an unplanned, spontaneous action. Workers elected their own representatives to negotiate with management, while the Shenzhen trade union served as mediator, urging management to concede to workers' 'reasonable' demands quickly. The results of the bargaining were not made public, but appear to have been favourable for the strikers as they resumed work after two days. Both the Nanhai Honda workers and these dock workers showed an enormous self-confidence in the worth of their labour in demanding such

high wage increases.

Nanhai Honda workers asked to have a new election for the trade union committee. Others had tried this before. In 2008, a group of workers at a Nestlé factory in Dongguan, led by a worker who had worked there for 13 years, started distributing leaflets to fellow workers calling for the trade union, which had been in existence for 12 years, to be replaced. The trade union chair was the manager who had continued to worsen work conditions. The news story was covered by the Chinese press, including *China Daily*. It was used as an example to illustrate the consequences of management violating the Trade Union Law in not having a regular union re-election ('Juechao Dongguanchang ...' 2008, Zhan 2008). Despite the publicity, the leader of this protest was dismissed by the company on grounds of misconduct. When a labour NGO tried to contact him, he had left the area.

It is interesting that though management-controlled unions are inactive, on rare occasions their formal existence can inspire workers to ask for a union re-election. This was what the Nanhai Honda and Nestlé workers did. A higher level of consciousness, however, is when workers fight to set up a new union – trade union consciousness, to use Lenin's expression. Normally the leaders of these fights already have some sense of trade unionism and take legal channels. This means taking an application with at least 25 co-workers' signatures to the district union that expresses the desire to have an election to set up a trade union (Article 13, The Trade Union Law of the People's Republic of China, 2001).¹⁴ In 2003, Liu, a 29 year old worker who worked in a Hong-Kong supplier factory that made aquatic sportswear for a New Zealand firm, collected 182 signatures (out of 2000 workers) and went to the district union to apply to set up a union. He then called a *New York Times* reporter in Beijing asking him to come to Shenzhen to cover the story (Kahn 2003). This strategy was initially useful in that it put pressure on the New Zealand buyer, who in turn put pressure on the Hong Kong supplier, to hold an election to set up a new union. But as in other similar cases, the union and factory management manoeuvred and controlled the union election and the effort came to naught. Liu then went to another factory to try to do the same but did not succeed.¹⁵ Liu's consciousness was quite high: he wanted to set up a new union

and was willing to take the risk of confronting management and the local government. Collecting signatures requires planning and courage.

The case that we think exemplifies a high level of trade union consciousness, coupled with organizational ability, fighting spirit and solidarity in the face of massive police suppression and violence, was a strike at a Uniden plant. The struggle began in December 2004 and lasted for about five months. This Japanese-owned plant had 16 000 employees, of whom 1000 were men (mostly office, technical and research staff) and more than 14 000 women (mostly production workers). Management culture was harsh and suppressive. Workers' demands were rights-based due to the large number of legal violations. The organizers of the protest issued a number of open letters to local government bureaucracies and management, and made good use of the internet to report on the latest developments to fellow workers and the public, coordinating daily and hourly actions. These reports and open letters provided a vivid picture of the scale and intensity of the struggle within and outside the plant for several months. It was quite clear that the core group of leaders were technical staff members, headed by someone who had studied in Japan. The call-to-action bulletin listed 15 demands related to wages, work hours, penalties, dismissals and social benefits, and one demand was to set up a trade union ('Riqu Shenzen ...' 2004). Japanese management quickly gave in to many of the demands, but not the demand to set up a union. After that management tried to isolate the leaders, humiliated them in public and had security staff beat them up. This provoked three days of large-scale fierce confrontations between strikers and police. A letter to the city mayor, reverberating with emotion, describes the violent strike scene:

This morning our workers cried and some policemen also cried. These were not ordinary tears; these were bitter and painful tears. This morning at 7 a.m. worker representatives were scheduled to assemble on the courtyard, but the moment they appeared security guards came to grab them and cordoned off the stage to prevent the women workers from coming close. But our women workers rushed up to protect them. There was kicking and pushing ... Screams

and cries filled the air and echoed inside and outside. Our Uniden women workers were so determined and strong. Many men workers were just standing there looking on. The women with tears in their eyes broke through the cordon and stood next to the representatives. They screamed, 'running dogs, running dogs' at the security people and drove them out ... Now everyone sat down and sang the Internationale, and when they reached the phrase 'without the Communist Party there would not have been a new China,' all 10,000 people sang with tears in their eyes ... After that they signed their names to support the representatives. 4700 people signed to demand a union ...

A union election was promised, but similar to what occurred in the Nestlé factory, the Uniden factory quickly got rid of the strike leaders, workers became demoralized and they lost control over their union election.

The workers displayed a high level of trade union consciousness in the Uniden case. They realized that only by having their own unions could they have an institution to genuinely represent their interests in the long term, even if management had conceded their economic demands. The protest was planned, but strike leaders made no attempt to solicit support beyond the workplace before beginning the struggle. The labour struggle was partially motivated by nationalism. The strike took place at a time when anti-Japanese rallies were springing up across the country and in Guangdong province it was in the third week of anti-Japanese street protests.

All these examples, together with the Nanhai Honda strike, were led by intelligent and courageous individuals. Some of them exhibited great workers' solidarity; at times the strikes were staged with strategic planning, and a small number were aware of the necessity of setting up their own trade unions if their hard-earned struggle was to be sustained.

In three of the above cases, workers wanted to elect their own unions. But this kind of demand is extremely rare. As a whole, the concept of unionism is non-existent or vague among workers. In this sense, the strike leaders who applied to form unions

are a kind of vanguard of class consciousness. However, since there has been no upsurge of workers in other factories using the same strategy to apply to form workplace unions these isolated, individual efforts are unlikely to succeed. And as has been seen, none of these attempts to form unions have yet succeeded. Workplace unions cannot exist in isolation. Unfortunately, in not even one case was there an attempt to link up with workers in other factories to organize a bigger, collective protest for democratic elections of official unions. The absence of such a movement is a reflection of low trade union consciousness.

Conclusion

One of the tasks of this chapter has been to locate the level of consciousness of the migrant workers in South China along a historical continuum of consciousness. Based on the empirical evidence presented here using the Marxist-Leninist theoretical schema, we conclude that migrant workers in South China as a class are at the level of 'embryonic trade union consciousness.' Breaking down the development of consciousness into stages and phases since the mid-1990s, we can see that their consciousness has been hovering at the rights-based level. The workers' main concern is still their own personal and immediate economic conditions, and only occasionally is there a breakthrough into the interest-based level. At times sparks of union consciousness might flicker.

Thus far, those who have asked for a union have been willing to register with the official union. This could have been strategic. But we think it is because workers continue to have the illusion that they can place their trust in authority. For instance, the Nanhai Honda workers allowed the provincial union to take over the organization of a union re-election. Their trust turned out to be misplaced. Their trade union representatives are now mainly management staff. One of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) core labour rights is freedom of association, which means allowing workers to have their own independent unions. The reality of the situation is that the Chinese state is not going to let go of its grip on labour. And, the migrant workers are

also not ready to form independent unions. The hope of the state and the ACFTU is that, if their version of 'collective consultation' can take place on a large scale in China, industrial relations can be regulated on their own terms, and social stability can be maintained. But without truly representative unions there cannot be real collective bargaining. The campaign for workplaces to conduct 'collective consultation' will only be another bureaucratic exercise. Presently the litigation route is not viable either. The number of litigations since the passing of the Contract Law of 2008 has multiplied and there is a big backlog of cases to be processed. Workers' trust in the legal system will soon vanish in frustration when they came to realize that the legal system is not on their side. They will have to look for alternatives – the next big step to take could be recalling management-controlled unions and electing their own union representatives and trade union chairpersons.

The solution to the problem comes back to workers having their own representation. Workers will have to struggle for it. But how long it will take for migrant workers to acquire a trade union consciousness is not easy to predict. After all, using history as our guide, it took many decades for European workers in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries to organize themselves into mature trade union structures and, when strong enough, to fight to gain recognition from capital and state. Only then would the latter agree to negotiate with unions. At present, no such collective action has surfaced in the Pearl River Delta region. The process may take another two decades. The process of maturation may be quickened if, for example, there is a drastic economic downturn, run-away inflation, an even more rapid widening of the income gap (which has not stopped widening) and if migrant workers rise up again and again..

The chapter has shown the factors constraining the development of class consciousness. One factor is that the material conditions of migrant workers have been rising, though they have not kept pace with the conditions of the prospering Chinese middle classes. Despite all the complaints about inflation, long work hours and poor housing, the conditions of the migrant workers of 2011 have improved since the days of the Zhili letters, when migrant workers endured hunger pangs because their income was so low and their conditions so poor. That was the era of bondage and physical

punishment inside factory compounds and, outside, the high risk of being thrown into detention centres by police and local government militia, of being beaten up, extorted for ransom, or being sent back to where they came from – a suppressive situation not dissimilar to the pass system that operated under South African apartheid. In Vietnam in the past few years, there have been press reports of migrant workers going hungry because the raised minimum wage could not keep up with the high inflation. In Dacca, Bangladesh, thousands of garment workers have risen up time and again to demand that the state raise the minimum wage because they cannot survive on such a meagre income. In India, where 93 per cent of the workers work in the informal sector, which is excluded from legal protection and rights, workers have organized themselves to demand legal recognition as ‘workers’. In September 2010 there was a one day general strike (Ali, 2011). In India, Foxconn workers went on strike and struggled hard to ask for a significant wage rise, the ‘regularization’ of contract workers and union recognition (‘India: Victimised Foxconn ...’ 2010).¹⁶ These were big, organized protests and the trade union leaders and strike leaders were quickly thrown into jail. The Chinese government has avoided such mass protests by raising the minimum wage high enough to catch up with inflation. As least Chinese migrant workers’ material conditions are relatively good in comparison to workers in quite a number of Asian countries. This can partially explain why Chinese workers have not felt the desperate need to organize themselves to demand the state to raise the minimum wage.

Material and social conditions in China have been rising gradually in the past two decades. It is a popular belief that the second generation of migrant workers is better educated. They want a better life. They want to stay in the cities. As a result, they are more prone to protesting. This line of argument regards generational factors as important in causing a rise in class consciousness. However, earlier in the chapter we argued that even 30 years is too short a timeframe to fully understand class formation and class consciousness. By lengthening the timeframe we gain a historical perspective. The emergence of a class-for-itself takes longer than one or two generations. Thus, despite the expectation that this second generation of migrant workers will push through to a new stage of class consciousness, reality militates against this expectation.

The state worries that workers' economic demands can turn into political demands, and because of this it is suspicious that labour NGOs and 'citizen agents' could be potential sites from which a political vanguard might emerge. Their existence is tolerated because their activities actually help to maintain social stability. They are at the same time distrusted and closely monitored, and sometimes harassed by the authorities. However as we have demonstrated, these groups are cautious not to overstep the scope of their activities beyond economic rights-based demands. They do not impart political ideology to the workers. In a state-controlled society in which the political climate is kept non-ideological (except for some formalistic slogans, such as 'market socialism' which is devoid of 'socialist' content) migrant workers have little to inspire them to understand their own class position. One very practical drawback is the absence of reading materials on trade unions and labour movements in general bookstores and libraries. Young Chinese migrant workers and students with curious minds often have to look back to the pre-1949 period for ideological inspiration. For instance, one of the two strike leaders of the Nanhai Honda strike told a reporter he liked to read Mao's poems ('Shoudu Maozedong ...' 2010).¹⁷

Production line workers' ability to mobilize thus far has been limited. It seems those who can organize better and communicate more effectively are either technicians (C. Chan 2010, pp. 43, 86) or staff members, as seen in the cases of V-tech and Uniden.¹⁸ Without an intelligentsia vanguard, the vanguard of the next stage of consciousness may ultimately emerge from within the working class. Not the less educated and exploited production line workers, but these better-educated members of the 'second generation' working class may be the labour movement actors. They may be the ones to take on the challenge to propel their own labour history forward.

Notes

¹ A shorter version of this paper was presented at a conference held by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) at Nanjing University in April 2011. A short version will be published in the German-language journal *Das*

Argument in March/April 2012.

² This newly coined expression has become popular among Chinese academics. For instance, see the edited volume, *The Problem of the Country's New Generation of Peasant-workers Melding into Towns and Cities: An Academic Forum*, organized by the Guangzhou Social Science Association, the Guangzhou Development Research Institute and the Guangzhou Human Rights Research Centre, held at Guangzhou City, November 2009.

³ Pun and Lu define the second generation peasant-workers as migrant workers who 'were born in the late 1970s and 1980s and who entered the labour market in the late 1990s and 2000s. This category includes the children who were born to the first generation and who grew up in either urban areas or rural communities' (2010, p. 495).

⁴ In fact, difficulty in collecting strike figures is a problem in all countries, not just in China. Even in the USA, only work stoppages of 1000 workers or more are recorded in official statistics. (See United States Department of Labor website: <http://www.bls.gov/wsp/>) Also see Dave Lyddon (2007, p. 27).

⁵ For instance, Chris Chan (2010) focuses on two cases.

⁶ These labour NGOs include: China Labour Bulletin, China Labour Watch, SACOM and Globalization Monitor.

⁷ This kind of hidden resistance is particularly well-portrayed in Ngai Pun (2005).

⁸ Initially the main NGOs were the Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee (HKCIC), Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC) and Chinese Working Women's Network (CWWN). Many of the idealists who founded these organizations shared a common experience: they were Hong Kong university students who went to support the student movement at Tiananmen Square in 1989. After the movement dissipated, these young idealists wanted to understand Chinese society in the hope of getting involved in social movements in China. The founding of these labour NGOs was one of the ways they found suitable at a time when there were serious constraints on political rights and freedom of association.

⁹ All foreign companies setting up assembly plants in China have to be joint ventures. The Chinese partners of these joint ventures are all local state enterprises. In Guangzhou, the auto company is the Guangzhou Automobile Group, which has a number of auto joint ventures. The CEO is an important government official. He plays three roles: as an employer, a mediator and as a government official whose job is to protect the workers from foreign exploitation.

¹⁰ We regret not being able to disclose more details than this for reasons of confidentiality and security. One fact we know is that these leaders have never read the Trade Union Law.

¹¹ Based on information from a Zhongshan University student who has been in touch with the workers,

no election has been held yet by September 2011.

¹² The information was provided by several Zhongshan University students who conducted follow-up research on the post-strike development of the plant. They went to the plant and the dormitories several times in 2010 and were able to talk to workers quite freely. The interpretation that the strike has failed is ours.

¹³ Information came from the Chinese labour activist who went to Nanhai to find out more about the strike and who met with some strike representatives.

¹⁴ A translation of this law is available at http://www.novexcn.com/trade_union_law.html.

¹⁵ One of us was able to track down Liu and met with him in 2007 in Shenzhen.

¹⁶ In China, Foxconn workers have not staged such protests. The big Foxconn controversy was over the suicides of more than a dozen workers in the first part of 2010.

¹⁷ Another example is Li Qiang who now heads the labour NGO China Labour Watch, based in New York. He told me he read a lot about the early period of the Chinese trade union when he was a labour activist in China. Yet another example is the worker who got the largest number of votes in a democratic trade union election organized by Reebok in one of its supplier factories in 2001. See Anita Chan, 2009.

¹⁸ Another example is the Walmart employees. After the Walmart trade unions were set up in all Walmart stores in China, the one case in which employees collectively negotiated with Walmart was the one in which some management staff, rather than the ordinary workers, negotiated when they were laid off in 2008. Information from Gao Haitao, the former trade union chair of the Walmart Nanchang Baiyi store who helped these managers in litigation.