



Guangzhou & US unions discuss global supply chains: an example of constructive engagement?

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One big debate in the international trade union movement in the past two decades has been whether to engage with the All-China Federation of Trade Union (ACFTU). As a union under the control of the Chinese Communist Party, one camp has argued for no engagement. The engagement camp that supports argued that in this enormous organization there must be some trade unionists who stood with labor, and they were the ones who might one day initiate change within the ACFTU. There has been hostility between the two camps. With time, more and more unions and labor activists around the world are seeking engagement with the ACFTU, in one fashion or another. Over the past several years, the Guangzhou Municipal Federation of Trade Unions (GZFTU) under the leadership of the chairperson Chen Weiguang in the past seventeen years, has emerged to be such a trade union, one that tries to take initiatives and test the prescribed limits of its "rights protection" mandate. It has tried to set up "industrial unions", the first one being the construction workers union, and as referenced in the translated article, there are plans to set up a union for the insurance industry. The GZFTU is unusually open to exchanges with foreign trade unions, labor NGOs and activists that go beyond formal hand-shaking or sight-seeing tours. Chen Weiguang has led a number of union delegations to Germany, the United States and other countries during which the delegates tried to learn about how unions function under other systems. In fact, four months ago one of the delegations collectively published an extremely informative book on the German industrial relations system, (1) following an intensive four-week tour of German factories in 2008 organized by Asiahouse in Essen.

This issue of CLNT carries an article by Century Economic Report covering a second visit by a GZFTU delegation to the United States. The China Daily also covered the story. (2) While in San Francisco Chen Weiguang was reported to have openly criticized Apple and said that Apple should bear responsibility for the spate of recent workers' suicides in IT manufacturer Foxconn. He was critical of the way international buyers maximize their profits by squeezing Chinese manufacturers, and said that multinational corporations should negotiate with Chinese capital and labor to distribute wealth more equitably along the global supply chain. He talked about exchanging ideas with American trade unions, though not to the extent of forming an alliance.

These reports are extremely interesting in that they are unusual. Firstly, this kind of trade union delegation on a study tour is rarely covered by the Chinese media, and secondly, it is noteworthy that the delegation was willing to make such statements while abroad.

Another sign of change is that in December 2009, both Chen Weiguang and Kong Xianghong, the Deputy Chairperson of the Guangdong Provincial Federation of Trade Unions, openly expressed their disagreement over the fact that the Guangzhou Police repeatedly staged "emergency police exercises" against migrant workers when they asked for unpaid wages. Chen Weiguang was quoted as saying "striking is not illegal" and "we did not feel comfortable when we saw (the police exercises)". (3) In China, this kind of open disagreements with other government departments is also very unusual.

Having said that, the Chinese public and workers' impression of the Chinese trade union is so negative that they see that they see nothing new in all these reports. Bloggers only pour scorn and sarcasm on the delegation. (4) It will be a long way to go before the GZFTU leadership can convince workers that it is genuinely trying to advocate on their behalf.

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[American labor union pressured Apple to make concessions to Foxconn: Chinese union invited to form alliance](#)

[美工会曾施压苹果向富士康让利邀中国工会结盟](#)

NOTES

(1) Factory Tour of Germany (deguo gongchang zhi lu). Published by Zhongguo Gonghui Fangde Kouchatuan, Beijing: Chinese Bookstore, 2010.

(2) China Daily, "US labor group offers helping hand," 22 July. 2010, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/7075833.html>



(3) 大洋网, 广州市工会主席: 罢工不是违法行为, 19 December 2009, <http://www.chinaelections.org/printnews.asp?newsid=164098>

(4) 南方周末, 劳资谈判, 为什么不向人家学习?, 2 September 2010 (4) 南方周末, 劳资谈判, 为什么不向人家学习?, 2 September 2010

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