

In the Name of the Working Class: Narratives of Labour Activism in Contemporary China

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ABSTRACT

Since their appearance in the mid-1990s, Chinese labour NGOs have mostly focused on disseminating labour law and guiding labour disputes through official channels. In so doing, they have assisted the Chinese Communist Party in achieving its paramount goal of maintaining social stability. In line with this approach, activists in these organizations have traditionally framed their work in terms of “public interest” or “legality,” both of which resonate with the hegemonic discourses of the Party-state. However, earlier this decade a minority of Chinese labour activists began to employ some new counterhegemonic narratives centred on the experience of the labour movement and the practice of collective bargaining that attempted to recode the proletarian experience outside of its official representation. In this paper we analyze this discursive shift through the voices of the activists involved, and argue that the rise of these new counterhegemonic voices was one of the reasons that led to the Party-state cracking down on labour NGOs.

Keywords: China, labour NGOs, labour activism, civil society, collective bargaining

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I believe that a labour movement is something sacred, something huge. It is not only about organizing a trade union inside a factory to challenge the internal system, we have to oppose the government's unfair treatment and oppression, do something bigger.

A labour activist in Shenzhen, June 2015

If you talk about the labour movement, the Party, who started to establish itself exactly through the labour movement ... gets alarmed. Why? Because this is the way in which they came to power.

A labour activist in Shenzhen, September 2015

According to the Leninist formula for revolution, worker discontent must be articulated in a narrative of political understanding.¹ The vanguard, Leninist Party has always been a party of the Word, spreading the “good news” of socialism to the working class wherever they are found, whether in the restive industrial suburbs of St. Petersburg or the vast countryside of China. In line with this approach, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded on the principle that words can mobilize the masses by providing them with a language to condemn their past, resist the inevitability of the present, and perceive the contours of a new future. In the late 1910s and early 1920s some of the earliest Marxist intellectuals who founded the CCP were first and foremost labour organizers, dedicated to the cause of enlightening Chinese workers through the establishment of night schools and lecture corps.² We posit that the CCP's origins as a revolutionary party (*geming dang*) have conditioned how its leaders perceive threats to its survival. If they lose their monopoly over discursive production—or “hegemony”—it will not be long before their authority unravels.³

In China, working-class politics is an ideological contradiction and therefore impossible to acknowledge. This does not mean that worker discontent, self-organization, mobilization, riots, and strikes are not taking place—in fact they happen all the time—but rather that the working class is barred from symbolic recognition as a form of political agency separate from the Party. The CCP's claim to represent the working class prohibits the latter from exerting a political voice outside of the strictures of Party discourse. What we refer to as counterhegemonic discourse is any speech—whether intentionally transgressive or not (and more often, it is not)—that could potentially erode the Party's monopoly of representation. From the Party's perspective, words are a form of action or at least have the potential

¹ Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? in Context* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006).

² Daniel Kwan, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Chinese Labor Movement: A Study of Deng Zhongxia (1894–1933)* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1997).

³ Christian Sorace, *Shaken Authority: China's Communist Party and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

of calling action into being (to its credit, the CCP does not draw an analytic distinction between words/actions, but recognizes and attempts to harness the power of performativity). To put it in Leninist terms, the Party has more than enough coercive power to crush sporadic labour unrest; what terrifies it are discourses that would undermine its authority.

Starting from this premise, in this essay we explain the ongoing crackdown on labour NGOs and activists as a defence of the sacred red lines of Party authority. The fear of unsanctioned working-class discourse is magnified by the fact that many labour NGO leaders in China emerged from the working class. According to Lenin, the revolutionary party is strengthened by recruiting workers who help elaborate theory on the basis of their experience.⁴ This idea was further developed by Gramsci's concept of "organic intellectuals." According to Gramsci, "every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields."⁵ As Gramsci pointed out, the emergence of "organic intellectuals" challenges hegemony by revealing the vacuity of the ideology of the ruling class on the basis of their own position within the relations of production. In Gramsci's model, "organic intellectuals" are the pivot between the "common sense" of the ruling regime and the "good sense" emerging from its contradictions.⁶ Even if their goals are modest and within the limits of state-sanctioned discourse, one could say that working-class intellectuals know too much. Given the lack of social capital and organizational capacity of labour NGOs, their threat is their distinctive position within the contradictions of China's political economy and ability to reframe the narratives of working-class conditions and lives.⁷

The CCP's discursive anxiety, however, does not answer the question of timing. Worker grievances over low wages, poor and dangerous conditions of employment, withheld pensions, and the list continues, are nothing new. Further, labour NGOs seemed to be helping the CCP achieve their explicitly stated goal of containing worker grievances within legal channels. If that is the case, why would the CCP target NGO leaders who seemed to be helping maintain social stability by moving labour unrest from the streets to the courts? What elicited the crackdown that began in 2015 and does not show

⁴ Vladimir Lenin, "What is to Be Done? Burning Questions of our Movement," in volume 1 of his *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publisher): 119–271.

⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York: New York University Press, 2000): 301.

⁶ Gramsci, *A Gramsci Reader*, 304–305.

⁷ Ivan Franceschini, "Labour NGOs in China: A Real Force for Political Change?" *The China Quarterly*, no. 218 (2014): 474–492.

signs of abating at the time of writing in 2019? In one of the latest instances, in January of 2019 the Shenzhen police detained five labour activists in three different cities and one month later formally charged them with “gathering a crowd to disrupt public order” (*juzhong raoluan shehui zhixu zui*). Although the arrested activists had unavoidably crossed paths in the past considering that in the whole of China there are only a few dozen labour NGOs, at the time of their arrest, they were no longer active in the same organizations nor involved in any specific case. In fact, some of them had moved away from activism, trying to reinvent themselves as business people or legal service providers. What can account for these seemingly belated arrests?

This essay argues that the roots of the recent crackdown are to be found in the new narratives that a minority of labour activists began to employ earlier this decade. These narratives attempt to describe and organize proletarian experience outside of its official representation. In an organic, bottom-up fashion, workers are beginning to articulate a sense of collective interests and solidarity which are not mediated by the Party (if not indirectly in opposition to it). At the same time, under Xi’s leadership, the Party has been redrawing the boundaries of China’s discursive space. This is a process of discursive recentralization against its fragmentation into competing narratives. These patterns are also reflected at the national level in Xi Jinping’s injunction to the Communist Party to exert its “discursive rights” (*huayuquan*) and “tell China’s stories well” (*jiang hao zhongguo gushi*), which is more than cultural soft power, but a (re)assertion of Communist Party hegemony over the forms of language and life in which people live.⁸

More specifically, we suggest that the unusually harsh attacks of the Chinese Party-state against labour activists are due to two main reasons: first, the centrality of labour to the Communist Party’s legitimacy, historically grounded in the claim of the CCP to represent “the vanguard of the Chinese working class” (*gongren jieji de xianfengdui*), which to this day remains enshrined in the Party’s constitution. Second, the transformation of narratives of worker activism promoted by labour NGOs from simple grievance to counterhegemony defined as speaking in an autonomous fashion that is not authorized by the Party-state (the increase of state control inversely expands the spaces of counterhegemony). What defines counterhegemonic discourse is not the intentions of the speakers nor the content of the speech but the political context in which words are ascribed significance. This results in a stark dissymmetry between how NGO activists understand what they are doing, saying, and hoping to achieve, and how the Party-state perceives those actions through its own frame of reference, historically forged through underground organization, worker mobilization, and revolution.

For the past decade, under the advice and assistance of some labour NGOs,

⁸ “President Xi Urges new media outlet to ‘tell China Stories well,’” *Xinhua*, 31 December 2016, accessed 9 May 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-12/31/c_135946550.htm.

workers started to speak in a representative capacity on behalf of and to other workers. Demands for collective bargaining and self-organization have become more widespread, in a break from the usual local, predominantly workplace-based grievances that remain most common in the Chinese context, what Lenin scathingly referred to as the problem of “economism.”⁹ Such claims perilously trespassed into the Communist Party’s discursive terrain. For anyone versed in Marxist theory, such as the CCP leaders, the threat this posed was unmistakable: the potential transformation of the working class from an objective sociological category to a political subject.¹⁰

These transformations constitute our main claim that labour NGOs in recent years have become an incubator of counterhegemonic discourse. In cracking down on labour NGOs, the CCP has engaged in what could be viewed as “cognitive class struggles from above” in a “constant battle for truth and its valid forms of utterance, a perpetual separation between seeming and real events, true and false prophets.”¹¹ From the CCP’s perspective, labour activists are false prophets heralding a heretical labour movement. That is to say, the CCP will never tolerate a working-class consciousness openly critical of its rule. To discredit the counternarratives about labour emerging from labour NGOs, official media have branded NGO leaders as agents of “hostile foreign forces” (*jingwai didui shili*). The language of “hostile foreign forces” is not empty hysteria but produces calculated effects. It means that labour NGOs do not belong within China’s legal, national, and political borders. Due to their foreign contamination, they are reduced to a liminal non-space that is both discursive and physical.¹²

While most of the existing literature focuses on the organizational strategies of labour NGOs and on the political constraints that they face in their work, this essay introduces a new layer to the discussion by examining how labour NGO activists frame their activism on a discursive level. The article is structured in four sections. In the first, we outline the context in which Chinese labour NGOs operate and highlight how these organizations have evolved over the years. In the second, we describe the “traditional” narratives employed by labour NGO activists to frame their activism— whereas by “traditional” we refer to the discursive practices adopted by labour NGOs that engage in service provision and rights protection, in contrast to those that emerged in later years and engaged in collective bargaining. In the

⁹ Lenin, “What is to Be Done?”

¹⁰ Wang Hui, “Depoliticized Politics, From East to West,” *New Left Review* 41 (September/October 2006).

¹¹ Peter Sloterdijk (translated by Wieland Hoban), *Foams: Spheres III* (South Pasadena: Semiotexte, 2016): 404.

¹² For an analysis of how state repression of labour NGOs operates, see Ivan Franceschini and Elisa Nesossi, “State Repression of Chinese Labor NGOs: A Chilling Effect?” *The China Journal*, no. 80 (2018): 111–129; and Diana Fu, “Fragmented Control: Governing Contentious Labor Organizations in China,” *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration and Institutions* 30, no. 3 (2017): 445–462.

third, we argue that a small group of worker activists has gone beyond these narratives to adopt a more militant discursive stance centred on “collective bargaining” as a proxy for working-class organizing and solidarity. Finally, in the fourth we outline the narrative put forward by the Party-state to undermine the potential challenges originating from this new model of activism. We conclude with some general remarks about the current situation of labour NGOs in China.

This article is based on fieldwork in China undertaken by one of the authors from January 2009 to October 2018. Over this period, he conducted several dozen semi-structured interviews with leaders and employees of labour NGOs. In a first round between 2009 and 2011, 30 leaders and employees of 16 different labour NGOs, mostly based in Shenzhen, were interviewed. During the second round in 2014–2015, interviews were conducted with 32 activists in 19 labour NGOs in Guangdong Province in the cities of Shenzhen, Dongguan, Guangzhou, and Huizhou, as well as some areas in Hunan, Zhejiang, and Shandong Provinces. The third round was in August 2016, when, due to the deteriorating political situation, he was able to conduct interviews with only 11 activists from 10 labour NGOs in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Dongguan, and Nanjing. Finally, the last round was conducted in October 2018, when he was able to interview five people from three different organizations, some of whom were later caught in the ensuing crackdowns. In total, over the years 65 people from 30 different NGOs were interviewed, a dozen of whom were interviewed more than once.

A clarification is in order. The NGOs we refer to in this paper are organizations that meet two requirements: first, their mission is directly related to the protection of the rights (*weiquan*) of Chinese workers, which excludes those organizations that engage exclusively in service provision on behalf of the authorities or in the organization of cultural activities; second, they have an internal structure that, at least on paper, is articulated (for example with a board of directors, an organizational chart, a constitution, etc.). Considering the small size of the labour NGO community in China, the organizations in our sample could not avoid interacting with each other. Still, their relationship was fraught with contradictions: while occasionally they collaborated on specific projects and cases, they most often found themselves competing for access to funding and visibility.¹³

From Legal Mobilization to Collective Struggle

Labour NGOs in China are “a looser array of organizations that may or may not be legally registered, independent of government, and which may or

¹³ Franceschini, “Labour NGOs in China.”

may not have professional salaried staff and volunteers.”¹⁴ Their status has always been provisional and rescindable. This—along with the precariousness of their funding, which, in the absence of internal sources, has mostly come in the form of project grants awarded by foreign actors, such as international trade unions and development agencies—makes it almost impossible to quantify their exact number, with estimates before the latest crackdown ranging from 40 to about 100 or more. The institutional fluidity of these groups—and the political risks involved in the field they operate in—means that they are highly sensitive to the contexts in which they carry out their work, functioning in some ways like barometers of political pressure. When such organizations first emerged in the mid-1990s, they were able to take advantage of the civil spaces opened up by economic reform and of the desperate need for renewed international legitimacy among the Chinese leadership in the wake of the 1989 crackdown.¹⁵ New sources of foreign funding flowing mainly from Hong Kong made this possible.¹⁶ It could be said that the spread of labour NGOs mirrored the proliferation of structurally disadvantaged populations who were excluded from the miracle of reform and subjected to despotic labour regimes in factories located in China. Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao’s (2003–2012) platform of a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*) was an attempt to integrate marginalized and disaffected categories of people into China’s narrative of uplift and progress. In this context, labour NGOs emerged as facilitators of inclusion and experienced extraordinary growth.

Given the intrinsic sensitivity of labour issues under the rule of the CCP, labour NGOs have been rarely allowed to register as non-profit entities and usually end up with a commercial registration (*gongshang zhuce*) or no registration at all. Since their appearance, these groups have engaged in four kinds of activities: a) the establishment of workers’ centres, where they organize educational classes and recreational activities; b) dissemination of information on labour rights; c) social surveys and policy advocacy; and d) provision of legal consultation and, in some cases, representation.¹⁷ What often goes unnoticed is how these categories largely reproduce the traditional roles and duties that the Communist Party assigns to the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), the only trade union whose existence is legally allowed in China, following the Leninist model of the “transmission belt.”

¹⁴ Jude Howell, “Shall We Dance? Welfarist Incorporation and the Politics of State-Labour NGO Relations,” *The China Quarterly* 223 (2015): 702–723, citation on 704–705.

¹⁵ Jude Howell, “Civil Society and Migrants in China,” in *Migrant Labour and Social Development in Contemporary China*, ed. Rachel Murphy (London and New York: Routledge, 2008): 171–194.

¹⁶ Chris King-chi Chan, “Community-Based Organizations for Migrant Workers’ Rights: The Emergence of Labour NGOs in China,” *Community Development Journal* 48, no. 1 (2013): 6–22.

¹⁷ Chan, “Community-Based Organizations for Migrant Workers’ Rights;” Yi Xu, “Labor Non-governmental Organizations in China: Mobilizing Rural Migrant Workers,” *Journal of Industrial Relations* 55, no. 2 (2013): 243–259.

As a result of these modest beginnings, the existing literature has mainly focused on and scrutinized the role of labour NGOs in strictly adhering to legalistic norms and practices, debating whether this strategy was conducive to broader political changes favourable to the working class or ended up undermining solidarity among workers.¹⁸ But as worker activism and discourse in China in the early 2010s rapidly evolved beyond a legalistic, rights-based framework centred on the individual worker to a more militant interest-based approach, half a dozen labour NGOs began advocating collective bargaining (*jiti tanpan*) as a new strategy to protect workers' interests and generate solidarity, thus empowering the working class.¹⁹ Until then, collective bargaining had remained in the domain of the ACFTU, which had watered it down to "collective negotiation" (*jiti xieshang*), a largely formalistic method of bargaining that was entirely handled by the official union under the assumption that employers and employees shared identical interests.²⁰ In light of the grassroots re-appropriation of the practice of collective bargaining by Chinese labour activists, in 2014, Duan Yi, a prominent labour lawyer and activist based in Shenzhen, wrote that Chinese labour NGOs were transforming from "service-oriented" (*fuwuxing*) and "rights protection-oriented" (*weiquanxing*) organizations—i.e., organizations engaged in the four kinds of activities described above—to "labour movement organizations" (*gongyunxing zuzhi*) focused on worker mobilization through collective bargaining.²¹ Duan Yi himself and other lawyers at his law firm played a fundamental role in promoting collective bargaining among Chinese labour NGOs and workers. They not only provided training to NGO staff and workers on how to negotiate collectively with employers but also partnered up with labour NGOs to provide guidance to the workers in collective actions.

Still, the hope for an empowered working class under the guidance of labour NGOs was short-lived. The experiment with collective bargaining ended abruptly in 2015, when the Party-state cracked down on labour NGOs. In December that year, the police detained a couple of dozen labour activists

¹⁸ See, for instance, Ching Kwan Lee and Yuan Shen, "The Anti-Solidarity Machine? Labor Nongovernmental Organizations in China," in *From Iron Rice Bowl to Informalization*, eds. Sarosh Kuruvilla, Ching Kwan Lee, and Mary E. Gallagher (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011), 173–187; Franceschini, "Labour NGOs in China," 485; Diana Fu, "Disguised Collective Action in China," *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 4 (2017): 499–527. In Chinese, see Yan Huang, "Chuangzhi gongminquan: Laogong NGO de hunhe zhanlue" [Producing citizenship rights: the mixed strategies of labor NGOs], *Guojia Xingzheng Xueyuan Xuebao*, no. 4 (2012): 100–106.

¹⁹ Feng Chen and Xuehui Yang, "Movement-oriented Labour NGOs in South China: Exit with Voice and Displaced Unionism," *China Information* 31, no. 1 (2017): 155–175; Chloé Froissart, "Negotiating Authoritarianism and Its Limits: Worker-led Collective Bargaining in Guangdong Province," *China Information* 32, no. 1 (2018): 23–45.

²⁰ For a more exhaustive discussion of collective bargaining in China, see Ivan Franceschini and Kevin Lin, "Labour NGOs in China: From Legal Mobilisation to Collective Struggle (and Back?)," *China Perspectives*, no. 1 (2019): 75–84.

²¹ Yi Duan, "Gongyunxing laogong NGO de qianjing yu tiaozhan" [Prospects and challenges for labour NGOs of the labour movement type], *Gongmin*, 20 May 2015, accessed 9 May 2019, xgmyd.com/archives/17927.

in Guangdong, eventually charging five of them.²² To signal that this was a national political campaign and not a local incident, Chinese state media decided to make an example out of one of the labour organizers—the usual tactic of “killing the chicken to scare the monkey”—and launched a comprehensive attack against the Panyu Migrant Workers Centre, a prominent labour NGO established in Guangzhou in the late 1990s that was on the front line of the campaign for collective bargaining. It did not take long before Party media outlets published long features accusing Zeng Feiyang, the director of the organization, of embezzling funds illegally obtained from foreign donors. Further, these reports attacked his personal character and motivations, claiming that he only posed as a “star of the labour movement” (*gongyun zhi xing*) to advance his own interests, at the expense of the workers.²³ In order to put a stop to the quest for collective bargaining, the Party-state publicly destroyed one of its champions. Eventually, Zeng was handed a prison sentence of three years, suspended for four years. Two of his colleagues received prison sentences of 18 months, suspended for two years, on the same charge of “gathering a crowd to disturb social order,” while another, a former security guard named Meng Han, was sentenced to 21 months in jail.

This landmark case had a chilling effect on Chinese labour NGOs.²⁴ Although some organizations did not entirely abandon collective bargaining, they significantly adjusted their approach, becoming more selective in their case screening process, warning workers of the potential dangers, and avoiding potentially disruptive situations.²⁵ Still, even this watered-down version of collective bargaining was too much for the Party-state, which, as we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, in January 2019 proceeded with the coordinated arrest and indictment for “gathering a crowd to disrupt public order” of an additional five labour NGO activists who in the past had played some role in promoting collective bargaining among Chinese workers. This happened in the wake of another crackdown that targeted workers at Shenzhen Jasic Technology, a private firm specializing in the manufacturing of welding machinery. During the summer of 2018, Jasic workers mobilized to demand, among other concessions, the right to establish their own workplace union, a request that was met by harsh, coordinated repression by both the employer and the local state, which in turn elicited solidarity

²² Sui Lee Wee, “China Arrests Four Labor Activists amid Crackdown: Lawyers,” *Reuters* 10 January 2016, accessed 9 May 2019, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-rights-idUSKCN0U005M20160110>.

²³ Cong Zhang, “Qidi ‘gongyun zhi xing’ zhen mianmu” [Exposing the true face of the ‘Star of the Labour Movement’], *Renmin Ribao*, 23 December 2015, 11; Wei Zou, “Guangdong jingfang dadiao weiquan zuzhi ju 7 ren, zhufan bei cheng ‘gongyun zhi xing’” [Guangdong police takes down a *Weiquan* organisation and detains seven people: main culprit was ‘Star of the Labour Movement’], *Xinhua*, 22 December 2015, accessed 9 May 2019, http://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1412138.

²⁴ Franceschini and Nesossi, “State Repression of Chinese Labor NGOs.”

²⁵ Froissart, “Negotiating Authoritarianism and Its Limits.”

from groups of Maoist and Marxist students all over the country.²⁶ Significantly, although labour NGOs were not directly involved in the Jasic mobilization, even in that case the Party-state attempted to place the blame on a Shenzhen-based labour NGO with ties to Hong Kong civil society for fanning the flames of worker discontent. After the latest round of arrests, what remained of labour movement organizations from the previous crackdown has been decimated.²⁷

“Traditional” Narrative Enclosures

To understand the advent of NGOs as “labour movement organizations,” it is important to grasp the conditions from which they emerged. As Duan Yi’s categorization makes clear, “traditional” labour NGOs in China function as “service-oriented” and “rights protection-oriented” organizations. Although they all work on labour issues, these organizations are not homogenous entities; in fact, they often follow different strategies and have diverse priorities and ways of describing their goals. More importantly, they are also marred by internal divisions, as they are staffed by two types of people: disenchanting former workers, and idealistic students seeking to “do something meaningful” with their lives. These two groups of people have different motivations and narratives about why they have become involved in labour organizing and activism, which are largely the result of distinctive underlying structural conditions. They also face dissimilar futures and opportunities for mobility. The respective narratives of these groups provide a glimpse not only into the daily operations of labour NGOs and the lives of the people who run them, but can also serve as an echolocation for sounding out the limits of the Party’s discursive tolerance.

a) Student Activists in Labour NGOs

In the months since the Jasic struggle, the Maoist and Marxist students from elite universities who have mobilized to support the workers have garnered international attention. Commentators perhaps have been overly eager and excited about this new “alliance” between workers and students, overlooking a twenty-year history of both social groups working alongside each other within labour NGOs.²⁸ Contrary to the students now in the spotlight for their solidarity with the Jasic workers, who openly identify with and position

²⁶ Despite the marginalized position and weak organizational capacity of everyone involved, the *symbolic solidarity* of students who take the spirit of Maoism not as a dead letter of authority posed a direct challenge to Communist Party legitimacy.

²⁷ Confessions are ventriloquized acts that reassert the authority of official discourse. Christian Sorace, “Extracting Affect: Televised Cadre Confessions in China,” *Public Culture* 31, no. 1 (2019): 145–171.

²⁸ Pun Ngai, “Guandian: Shenzhen jia shi gongren weiquan de liang da yiyi” [Opinion: The two significant aspects of Jiashi workers’ rights protection], *BBC*, 17 September 2018, accessed 9 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/45217517>.

themselves within the Maoist tradition of class struggle, student activists working for labour NGOs usually frame their activism as motivated by their desire to undertake “public interest work” (*gongyi gongzuo*) to improve society. The motivation of students to “improve” and “give back” to society supports the CCP’s narrative that state-society relations should be governed by “gratitude” and “reciprocity.”²⁹ In most cases, this is related to some volunteering experience at the university. For instance, one female activist with a bachelor’s degree in law observed:

I was quite interested in public interest organizations, because when I was at the university I used to join the activities of some NGOs When, after getting my degree, I entered a law firm, I felt that I was not living up to my ideals, and so at the first opportunity I joined a labour NGO I also had another reason. When I was at the law firm, labour disputes were occasionally brought to us, but usually the lawyers did not want to handle these cases. When the workers came to seek help, not a single lawyer in the firm was available to accept these cases and every time they sent me to refuse This made me feel unhappy.³⁰

Positive idealism, not labour militancy, plays an important part in their activism, with some of these student-activists expressing a strong urge to find something “meaningful” (*you yiyi*) in a materialistic society. As one of them told us:

When I was studying social work at the university, I often worked as a volunteer. For instance, I went to the countryside to teach and I joined a social organization that paid attention to urban migrant workers, left-behind children, or elders Then I came here to the south, where there are more workers I felt that here I could find something that could be of interest, it didn’t matter if it was for me or for the workers. For this reason, after graduating I didn’t look for a job and I came directly to work in this organization, first as an intern, then as an employee.³¹

Student activists have different ways of dealing with pressure coming from the authorities, but their youth, as well as the awareness that they can actually leave the NGO sector at any time to pursue a more profitable career in their field of specialization, makes them more risk-averse.³² For instance, an NGO

²⁹ Anthony J. Spires, “Chinese Youth and Alternative Narratives of Volunteering,” *China Information* 32, no. 2 (2018): 203–223; Bin Xu, *The Politics of Compassion: The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017); Christian Sorace, “China’s Vision for Developing Sichuan’s Post-Earthquake Countryside: Turning Unruly Peasants into Grateful Urban Citizens,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 218 (2014): 404–427.

³⁰ Interview subject 1, Shenzhen, January 2011. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees and the precise dates when the interviews took place are withheld by mutual agreement.

³¹ Interview subject 2, Shenzhen, February 2011.

³² Chen and Yang, “Movement-oriented Labour NGOs in South China,” 158.

leader told us the story of a university student who took an internship in his organization. He had worked there for less than one week, when he received a phone call from a teacher and decided to leave in order not to harm his chances of becoming a public servant. The NGO leader compared this story with that of a more resilient student intern from a prestigious university:

The public security came looking for her a few times. They threatened her, summoning her to the police station and telling her to leave. They said that this was not even a real job, that it was just an internship that could have been done anywhere else, that here was dangerous. She asked what kind of danger and they replied that her background was very worrisome and who knew what kind of foreigners she associated with. They said that if she continued the internship, she would have had troubles if she wanted to continue her studies, or even graduate from her university. Also, if she wanted to become a public servant, this would have left a bad impression, it would have been quite a nuisance. But she didn't heed their advice.³³

Still, activism is only a transitional stage in the lives of these student activists. After a few months or years, such idealism generally caves under pressure from their parents, who are worried about the career prospects of their offspring, or because the activists themselves burn out, or decide to leave the dangers of the sector in order to start a family. Although their commitment to the cause of worker rights should not be underestimated, these student activists seldom belong to the Chinese working class and in most cases lack experience of factory work, a situation that often makes it difficult for them to communicate with the workers. Indeed, in some organizations this has caused tensions. For instance, a worker-activist who had spent several years working in a labour NGO explained his decision to leave his organization in these terms:

[My student colleagues] didn't dare to do anything, I thought that I could do a little better by myself ... I was the only one taking care of the rights protection work in my organization, it was too busy. They invited two students, but honestly students do not understand that much about the social situation, they just know some things they read in books and books are not so connected to reality.³⁴

b) Worker Activists in Labour NGOs

Activists with a worker background—who constitute the majority of the staff and leaders of Chinese labour NGOs—generally explain their decision to engage in activism by describing direct experiences with the legal system. Their stories usually follow the same pattern: after his or her rights were

³³ Interview subject 3, Shenzhen, September 2015.

³⁴ Interview subject 4, Dongguan, August 2016.

violated, the worker undertook a long struggle to seek redress, a process during which he or she “awakened” to the inefficiency of the Chinese legal system and the untrustworthiness of the Party-state when it comes to protecting the rights of the workers. The following story is emblematic:

When, in 2008, I got burned in a factory fire, my boss brought me to the hospital and left me there. I went back to look for him—my body was still all wrapped in bandages—but I could not find him anywhere. I sought help from the local government, the trade union, several government departments, and even the media, but to no avail. To get treated, I had to borrow money. When I ran out of money, the hospital stopped giving me any medicine, so at night I slept there and during the day I went to a private clinic to get some injections. After a couple of weeks, when I felt better, I started to fight for my rights. In this process, I saw too many workers who were confused and helpless like me. It was then that I decided to help them.³⁵

Eventually, after a long and bitter struggle, this worker managed to receive compensation from his employer and decided to use the money to establish his own labour organization in a second-tier city in eastern China.

Often, these worker activists discover the existence of labour NGOs only when they first try to resort to the legal system. Many of them recall their initial surprise in finding out that in China there are organizations that provide help without asking for anything in return. In this regard, labour NGOs are usually compared favourably to the inefficiency and corruption of government bodies, official union and labour offices. For instance, a worker activist described his first encounter with a labour NGO in these terms:

When I got in touch with it in 2008, I was still dealing with my labour dispute. Unlike the official labour departments, the NGO really protected the rights of the workers and did not try to cheat you. The labour departments would try to deceive you. If you could receive a compensation of 50,000 RMB, they would say that 10,000 was more or less enough, that you shouldn't ask for too much as this was the law. Most labour departments would say something like this, but not labour NGOs.³⁶

Usually the commitment of the activists with a worker background lasts longer than that of student activists, although economic pressures and fears for their own safety remain powerful deterrents. According to our interviews, many of these worker activists simply feel that they have no alternative, as they do not want to go back to being ordinary workers in a factory after years of effort as labour leaders. Others worry that no employer will hire them given their record as “troublemakers” (*diaomin*). This feeling of desperation

³⁵ Interview subject 5, Shenzhen, November 2014.

³⁶ Interview subject 6, Dongguan, October 2014.

is one of the reasons that make these worker activists more willing to undertake risks—as demonstrated by the fact that almost all activists in “labour movement organizations” were former workers.³⁷ Another reason is that, despite the different solutions that they advocate for China’s social problems, common experience has made them fully aware of the emptiness of the rhetoric of the Party-state and of the structural weakness of the working class in contemporary China.

Still, most often it is their direct experience with the legal apparatus that has emboldened workers to engage in activism. For these worker activists, labour activism is a direct outcome of the failure of the Chinese Party-state to embody its commitment to labour rights, expressed in both labour law and official propaganda. That the pro-labour rhetoric of the Chinese Party-state has ended up fuelling the activism of Chinese workers is evident in many respects. As Gallagher and Wang have noted, “legal experience leads to higher levels of disillusionment and more negative perceptions of the legal system’s effectiveness and fairness,” while “non-users tend to have vague but benevolent notions of the legal system and its effectiveness.”³⁸ Our interviews with labour NGO activists substantially confirm that in the event of a labour dispute, the high expectations of the workers towards the labour law fuelled by the propaganda of the Party-state easily reverses into a feeling of disillusionment that creates the conditions for activism.

And yet, although worker activists are aware of the structural weakness of the working class in contemporary China, in most cases they continue to act within the constraints of the current hegemonic structure. Despite their disenchantment with the status quo, they continue to encourage workers to resort to the legal system as the only feasible strategy in China’s political environment. For several workers, however, the dead-end nature of this strategy was readily apparent. They realized that the only way to defend their rights was collectively.

Counterhegemonic Narratives

Aware of the limitations of the Chinese legal system and of the rhetoric of the Chinese Party-state, labour NGO activists faced an impasse: to continue individual case-based legal consultation with largely disappointing results, or attempt to amplify their voices collectively? Although only a handful of them took the latter path, the consequences of this decision were significant. Whereas the traditional strategy of legal mobilization could be absorbed within the legalistic discourse of the Party-state and tolerated as a mode of

³⁷ Chen and Yang, “Movement-oriented Labour NGOs in South China.”

³⁸ Mary Gallagher and Yuhua Wang, “Users and Non-users: Legal Experience and Its Effect on Legal Consciousness,” in *Chinese Justice: Civil Dispute Resolution in Contemporary China*, eds. Margaret Woo and Mary Gallagher (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 204–33. Citation at 204.

outsourced governance, collective bargaining was a bottom-up attempt to redistribute discursive and organizational power. In worker calls for solidarity, the Communist Party heard a challenge to their hegemony.

Labour NGOs activists were well aware of—and to some extent shared—the criticism being levelled at them due to their exclusive focus on community building and legal mobilization. Some of our interviewees expressed a notable disillusionment with such a strategy, perceived as largely ineffective in advancing social justice, and expressed their preference for an interest-based strategy centred on collective bargaining, at least wherever the political situation allowed for it. As an activist based in Shenzhen told us:

Before we used to focus on the usual legal training, legal aid, cultural and recreational activities, but after doing this for many years we felt that the problems faced by the Chinese labour movement go beyond the realm of law. It is not that if you provide the workers legal counsel and legal aid, you can solve their problems. It is not like that. What do workers lack in China? They lack solidarity and organization. If they don't have organization, it is very difficult to change their position of weakness. For instance, if you use the law, you can only protect the most basic rights that you have, such as getting the minimum wage. Some things cannot be solved through the law.³⁹

In response to such disgruntlement, collective bargaining represented not only a shift in strategies and tactics but also a new discourse about working-class solidarity and its relationship to the structures of power within which it is embedded. In an interview that we conducted in August 2016, a labour lawyer who played a fundamental role in spreading the concept of collective bargaining among workers and activists defined the new role of labour NGOs as “providing special training to worker leaders.”⁴⁰ According to him, in addition to training the next generation of organic intellectuals, a further indispensable “use” of NGOs is to “connect the workers from different factories” because the “workers are unable to do this on their own.” This discourse of educating and organizing workers is lifted directly from the CCP's handbook. It not only violates the (unwritten) cardinal rule of keeping strikes limited to the factory floor from which they originate—a point well established in the literature⁴¹—but it also reveals an uncanny isomorphism between labour movement NGOs and the CCP organization.

These themes are repeated in an interview with the leader of a labour NGO at the forefront of the campaign for collective bargaining that we

³⁹ Interview subject 3, Shenzhen, September 2015.

⁴⁰ Interview subject 7, Shenzhen, August 2016.

⁴¹ Anita Chan and Kaxton Siu, “Chinese Migrant Workers: Factors Constraining the Emergence of Class Consciousness,” in *China's Peasants and Workers: Changing Class Identities*, eds. Beatriz Carrillo and David Goodman (London: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2012), 79–101.

conducted in July 2015, just a few months before he was arrested.⁴² He explained the main “concept” behind his NGO as a conduit through which workers “become aware of their identities” and “amply understand the value of their labour.” According to Marxist epistemology, he was describing the awakening of working-class consciousness. It is worth bearing in mind the traditional role of the CCP as the vanguard whose sole mission is to instruct the working class on how to recognize and overthrow their own conditions of exploitation. Further, this activist called for “mutual care, mutual help, mutual support, and solidarity among workers” as the core of a “worker organization” that is able to “defend rights” and “negotiate with capitalists.” Absent from this narrative of worker solidarity, organization, and negotiation is the CCP. Whether or not the Party-state is expected to stand on the side of the capitalists or the workers is indicated by the silence. This seemingly inoffensive description of organizational purpose sounds very different in the context of China’s revolutionary history. Whether knowingly or not, this activist—along with his colleagues—stepped into a prohibited discursive space left behind by the Communist Party. It did not take long for that space to be fenced off and its unwelcome occupants evicted.

The discourse of collective bargaining calls into question the validity of the concept of “rightful resistance,” which argues that grievances are less likely to be repressed if they are articulated in the official language of the Party-state.⁴³ Even the majority of labour activists evince faith in this assumption, and defend their demands as entirely protected by official discourse and legality. But to face the issue directly: How is labour anything but a political issue in the context of a country in which the Communist Party is presiding over capitalism’s latest wave of exploitation of bodies and resources? The defence of speaking in the language of the Party does not hold up to scrutiny in a context in which every word can have multiple layers of meaning and political ramifications.

This issue crystallizes in the problem of how labour activists define and describe their identity, goals, and motivation. Although the term “labour movement” is an official part of Communist Party history and lexicon, it cannot be translated into the contemporary context of collective bargaining without raising red flags. For example, the leader of an NGO that had been given the label of a “labour movement organization” voiced concern over this designation, preferring to describe his group as a “comprehensive” (*zonghexing*) organization. The rationale behind this definition is revealing and worth quoting in full:

⁴² Interview subject 8, Guangzhou, July 2015.

⁴³ Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

If you call us a “labour movement” [NGO], it will be relatively sensitive. First of all, it depends on how you understand “labour movement”—do you mean the Party-state’s labour movement or our non-governmental labour NGO labour movement? The goal of the former was to overthrow [and seize] political power, while our labour-movement is purely about the protection, maintenance, and guarantee of economic rights We will not raise even one political demand.⁴⁴

“Labour movement” names a discursive field to which the CCP monopolizes and controls entry. Conscious of the potential ramifications of words in Chinese politics, this activist carefully distinguished his organization’s intentions from the Communist Party’s revolutionary origins. For him, today’s labour movement is limited to the economic sphere and has no political objectives—but does the Communist Party see matters in that way?

Despite this activist’s insistence that his labour NGO only wants to “improve the system” and not “overthrow it,” he proceeds in the latter part of the interview to describe his organization in terms similar to the traditional role of the vanguard Leninist Party:

Through our efforts we also hope to improve the system ... but today our workers don’t have this kind of demands yet. Normally, a labour movement should have workers at its center, but at this moment workers still don’t have this kind of awareness or mobilization capacity. In the past, the work was done by NGOs or by movement-oriented NGOs, but now the situation has evolved and workers should be the center. Maybe now we will just walk in front of them, providing them with support and encouragement.⁴⁵

As with the account of the other activist discussed above, both activists define their goals in terms of raising worker “awareness” (*yishi*). Although labour NGOs have traditionally provided education and awareness, their activities were confined to the sphere of legal education. When the object of awareness shifted from individual-based legal education to collective bargaining, it veered too close to CCP discourse. The cultivation of collective working-class consciousness is the prerogative of the Communist Party—it is not a right that can be shared.

Our 2016 interview with the labour lawyer revealed a similar contradictory discursive structure.⁴⁶ In a verbal balancing act, he argued that his law firm had “no influence on state power” but “negatively impacts” and “infuriates” the official trade union which has lost its “influence and status” among the workers. At the same time, he was aware that it is not possible to neatly separate the official labour union from the question of state power. In the

⁴⁴ Interview subject 3, Shenzhen, August 2016.

⁴⁵ Interview subject 3, Shenzhen, August 2016.

⁴⁶ Interview subject 7, Shenzhen, August 2016.

following breath, he connected the labour union's power to shut down his law firm's collective bargaining activities to its "high position" as a "constituent part of the state apparatus." Precisely because it usurps the role of the union, collective bargaining is "judged to damage national interest." Despite all of the caveats about not "touching" state power, collective bargaining cannot be anything other than a counterhegemonic discourse within the People's Republic for historical, institutional, and political reasons.

Narratives of Repression

Official materials that express distrust toward labour NGOs are difficult to obtain. A rare exception is an internal document drafted in 2009 by the Guangdong Politics and Law Committee of the Communist Party, which described labour NGOs as "civic agents" (*gongmin daili*) that intensify labour conflicts, carry out covert investigations of factories, and receive funding from overseas entities to intervene in the "contradictions among the people"—a Maoist phrase which is now Party code for unwanted political meddling in internal affairs—thus endangering social stability, the security of the state, and the international image of the country.⁴⁷

Unsurprisingly, among all the agencies of the Party-state, the ACFTU has been particularly vocal in promoting this narrative of labour NGOs as agents of foreign forces. In 2007, Liu Jichen, then director of the legal department of the ACFTU, publicly declared that Western hostile forces were taking advantage of labour controversies to split the solidarity among the ranks of Chinese workers and employees, interfering with the internal affairs of the union.⁴⁸ He insisted that "preventing foreign hostile forces from using *weiquan* as a pretext to infiltrate and create a split between the union and the ranks of the workers is [a task] of the utmost severity." In a similar vein, in February 2015, Li Yufu, then vice-president of the ACFTU, stigmatized labour NGOs for their connections with foreign donors.⁴⁹ According to Li, "hostile foreign forces" intent on wreaking havoc in China were resorting to "some illegal 'rights protection' labour organizations and individuals to vie with the unions for workers, and in so doing they break the solidarity of the working class and the unity of the unions." Later in the same year, a top

⁴⁷ China Labor News Translation, "Chinese Labor NGOs and Free Legal Services Always in a Precarious Situation," 26 January 2010, accessed 9 May 2019, <http://www.clntranslations.org/article/51/citizen-agents>.

⁴⁸ Bin Guo, "Quanzong: laodong zhengyi cheng gaofa taishi, gang jingwai didui shili shentou pohuai" [ACFTU: Now that there is a high incidence of labor disputes, we have to prevent the infiltration by hostile foreign forces], *Zhongguo Wang*, 30 January 2007, accessed 9 May 2019, http://www.china.com.cn/news/txt/2007-01/30/content_7736389.htm.

⁴⁹ Lin Yang, "Quangguo zonggonghui dangzu shuji: jingwai didui shili tongguo 'weiquan' yu gonghui zhengduo zhigong" [The secretary of the Party group of the ACFTU: hostile foreign forces contend workers from the trade union through "Rights Protection"], *Liaowang Zhoukan*, 28 February 2015, accessed 9 May 2019, http://www.guancha.cn/society/2015_02_28_310576_1.shtml.

union official in Shenzhen referred to movement-oriented labour NGOs as “independent trade unions—going by the name of ‘NGOs’—that attempt to evade the requirements of the Chinese law.”⁵⁰ The implication being that without labour NGOs to activate class struggle, relations among workers, labour, and capital would be harmonious. In the above accounts, class struggle is displaced from the factory and projected onto an external enemy. The contradiction is no longer internal, but the result of foreign interference.

Official denunciations of labour NGOs as agents of “hostile foreign forces” have been in circulation for a decade, but have never been systematically deployed and forcefully articulated until the campaign against Zeng Feiyang in 2015. In late December 2015, a few weeks after the arrest of Zeng and his colleagues, official news media began a concerted campaign against labour NGOs. In a long article published online on December 22 by the official Xinhua News Agency, among other things, Zeng was accused of embezzling funding illegally obtained from foreign donors and ridiculed for being eager to promote himself as a “star of the labour movement” (*gongyun zhi xing*) while acting without any regard for the actual interests of the workers.⁵¹ To further damage his credibility, he was also accused of several instances of sexual misconduct. This report—along with a *People’s Daily* article that appeared the following day⁵²—described in some detail the role that Zeng’s organization had played earlier that year in a high profile collective dispute, making clear that labour NGOs should steer clear of strikes. Still, the strongest emphasis was given to Zeng’s ties with foreigners, further solidifying the narrative of labour NGOs as agents of foreign forces.

The official narrative is that Zeng Feiyang is not a labour hero but an impostor, someone who instrumentalizes and inflames the real grievances of the working class for his own international status and fame. He is only a false prophet, whereas the Communist Party is the guardian of truth. All articles on Zeng Feiyang that appeared in the Chinese media in the wake of his arrest are framed as exposés of the real Zeng Feiyang, whose “outside appearance” as a selfless friend of the working class differs from his “inner reality” (*biaolibuyi*) as an egotistical womanizer. Instead of supporting the workers, Zeng Feiyang’s supposedly callous actions ultimately brought them harm. The purpose of such articles is to demolish the discourse of labour NGOs by discrediting their proponents.

⁵⁰ Tongxin Wang, “Jiti xieshang de chengzhang yu kunhuo: Yi Yantian Guoji wei li” [The progress and difficulties of collective consultation: taking Yantian International as an example], October 2015, accessed 9 May 2019, www.chineseworkers.com.cn/newsitem/277175765. Cited in Chen and Yang, “Movement-oriented Labour NGOs in South China,” 16.

⁵¹ Zou, “Guangdong Police Takes Down a *Weiquan* Organisation and Detains Seven People.”

⁵² Zhang, “Exposing the True Face of the ‘Star of the Labour Movement.’”

Figure 1

A panel from the comic strip released by the Chinese authorities in April 2018



Source: *China File*, 18 April 2018, <http://www.chinafile.com/ngo/latest/government-cartoon-portrays-foreign-ngos-national-security-concern>.

The discourse of branding NGOs as agents of hostile foreign forces resurfaced in the media in China in 2018 in at least two instances. The first instance was on the occasion of the National Security Education Day on April 15, when the government disseminated a comic strip targeting labour NGOs to workers in defence-related industries (see figure 1 above). In it, we see a blonde, bespectacled foreign NGO staff member offering money to a local labour NGO leader to hold training sessions for workers on “Western ideas of labour” and “Western ideas of trade unions” with the aim of causing social unrest. The second instance was in late August, when, in the wake of the Jasic struggle mentioned above, the Party-state decided to shift the blame for the actions of the workers onto the Migrant Workers Centre (*dagongzhe zhongxin*), a Shenzhen-based labour NGO. Not only did the police arrest two people connected with the NGO, but state media also began publishing articles accusing the Centre of instigating Jasic workers at the behest of “hostile foreign forces” based in Hong Kong.⁵³

⁵³ “Shenzhen Jiashi Gongsi gongren ‘weiquan’ shijian de beihou” [Background of the “Rights Protection” incident of the workers at the Jasic company in Shenzhen], *Xinhua*, 25 August 2018, accessed 9 May 2019, http://www.sohu.com/a/249976213_117916.

These attacks achieved their intended goal. According to our interviews and all available secondary evidence, the labour NGOs that were still active in collective bargaining have now completely ceased operation and even traditional organizations engaged in cultural activities and rights protection are struggling to survive.⁵⁴ To keep going, most of them find new ways to cooperate with the local authorities and become service providers, or attempt to reinvent themselves in the field of corporate social responsibility. The stories that we collected support our argument about a continuum of practices that become counterhegemonic as soon as they mirror the official discourse that is the monopoly of the Communist Party.

Conclusion

Although this paper focuses exclusively on labour NGOs, under Xi Jinping's administration the relationship between the Party-state and civil society has become increasingly tense. Besides labour NGOs, human rights lawyers, LGBTQ activists, and religious groups have all faced different degrees of repression. Since these actors all belong to the "unofficial" side of Chinese civil society—in contrast with the "official" side composed of authorized organizations, such as community NGOs and other service providers—this general crackdown could be read as an attempt to reinforce the grip of the Party-state on Chinese society. Still, the case of labour NGOs is somehow exceptional in that to this day the Communist Party's symbolic legitimacy depends on its monopoly over the representation of the working class. This means that labour in China can only be represented but is not allowed to represent itself. It is trapped in an aesthetic form of past revolutionary glory, which bars it from political agency in the present. In today's capitalist China under the rule of a communist party, the working class is alienated not only from their labour but also from their self-image and possibility of collectively representing their interests.

In the absence of a mass labour organization and social movement, for a brief period of time some labour NGOs in China began to articulate working class frustration and aspiration. More than the content of what they said, the very fact of their speaking was counterhegemonic. To speak as a working class, with collective interests and demands in need of redress, they recast the Communist Party's developmental model as rooted in the exploitation of labour required to sustain accelerated capitalist growth. As the Communist

⁵⁴ Some Chinese sources argue that labour NGOs today are further diversifying their strategies, but this is not consistent with our experience. See, for instance, Ronggui Huang, Yong Gui, and Fu Yu, "Xin shidai laogong yiti de shehui zhili: qunti, zuzhi yu xingdong" [Social governance for the new generation of labour issues: crowds, organizations, and actions], *Gonghui Lilun Yanjiu*, no. 1 (2019): 32–37.

Party approaches its centenary anniversary in 2021, and steers China through the turbulent waves of global capitalism, it will protect its sacred origins as the vanguard of the working class, even if that requires sacrificing the interests of labour itself.

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