

Honda Workers Strike for Labour Rights and Trade Union Representation

Monday 7 June 2010, by [BAI Ruixue](#) (Date first published: 3 June 2010).

Striking Honda workers in Foshan, Guangdong Province have shown incredible courage and determination in their fight to demand higher wages. Workers have now been on strike for more than two weeks. Strike action initially began on May 17th when more than 100 workers went on strike. This was followed up by two strikes on May 21st which resulted in Honda management retaliating and dismissing two of the leading workers. The following day the whole factory went out and began a strike which has seen the stoppage of all Honda's production in China.

Honda workers in China are being paid wages that are well below industry standards. Before the strike began, including all allowances, they earned just over 1500 Yuan per month, meaning that after social security and other deductions are made their take home pay is just over 1200 Yuan. The workers want their wages to increase to 2000-2500 Yuan per month.

Most of the workers at the factory are very young. Of more than 1800 workers who have gone out on strike, more than half are high school students on internship programmes. This means that they are not protected by Chinese Labour Law. Honda management has been quick to take advantage of this and have exploited the workforce further by using the fact that many of their employees are interns to pay wages at a level below the minimum wage.

The workers have rejected several pay offers, as well as the offer of a higher meal allowance for employees, made by Honda management since the strike began. It was not until 1st June that workers started a conditional return to work. In a letter written by worker representatives dated 3rd June they state that if they are not given satisfactory answers to their demands within three days then they will continue with and resume their strike action. They also state that while there is a workers' negotiating team, they will not accept any proposal from management without convening a congress of frontline workers and obtaining their mandate. [1]

Throughout the strike Honda management have been doing all they can to divide the workers in an attempt to weaken and break the strike. One key way that they have tried to do this is through treating the interns and regular workers differently, by offering them different wage increases. Many of the workers have refused to be divided and discriminated against in such a way. When the management made these offers all the workers strongly rejected them. In addition to this, management have tried to apply further pressure on the interns by sending in their school teachers, along with the local government officials, to try to persuade workers to go back to work. On May 27th they also tried to pressurise the interns into signing "commitment letters" saying that they would not continue to strike. Nevertheless the strike's leaders have stressed the need for solidarity and called on all workers to maintain a high degree of unity in face of their employers' attempts to divide them. [2]

The workers have complained about the huge injustice in the way that they are paid miserable wages, while Honda is claiming huge profits as a result of their labour. Honda is a Fortune 500 company. It reported profits of 774 million US dollars for the first quarter of this year and says it expects to see its profits rise further through the next financial year. [3] It has been pointed out that

with the low wages that they earn, Honda workers would never be able to afford one of the cars which they help to produce. According to one Honda worker:

"China! It has been promoting low-cost competition and cheap labor. Our GDP keeps growing! However, this growth relies on exploiting our cheap labor. We have created all this wealth but only get very low wages in return." [4]

The strike, however, has become about more than just pay. In addition to the demand for a pay increase of 800 Yuan per month, compensation for additional years of service, and improved treatment, workers have also called for the re-election of their union representatives. This is a very significant demand as it illustrates the workers dissatisfaction with the way in which the trade union currently operates. They do not want a union which simply urges them to go back to work, but rather they want to be able to elect representatives of the workplace union who are willing to act in accordance with their interests. One worker has complained that:

"At this critical moment our great trade union did nothing for us. Instead they just wanted us to go back to the production line! Is this what a union should be doing? You take from our monthly wages 5 yuan for union dues but look what you have done for us!" [5]

Indeed at the local level of the ACFTU, the union has placed itself in direct opposition to the workers' struggle against Honda management. On May 31st striking workers reported that they had been physically assaulted by men wearing union badges. The ACFTU, which has done nothing to protect the workers during the course of this dispute, has once again clearly demonstrated that its role has become one which is more accommodatory to serving the interests of capitalists, rather than protecting the rights of workers.

Honda workers have taken legitimate action to fight for fairer wages and labour rights. They are therefore justifiably very angry about the way they have been violently attacked in response to their action. They are reported to have said to their management "Lets not talk about wages first, wages are not important now. Let's first talk about the issue of us being beaten up." [6]

On June 1st the local ACFTU, most probably afraid by the reaction to their attack on the workers, issued a vague public apology letter addressed to the workers for its actions. It nonetheless continued to condemn the workers' strike for disrupting normal production in the factory. The letter still reiterates the union's position as a mediator rather than defender and protector of the workers' rights and states that both management and employees should make concessions and compromises:

"We believe that the consultation between management and labour should be based on "mutual trust, understanding and support". Both sides need to make certain concessions and compromises. Only this can lead to a consensus being reached quickly. We hope the workers will stay calm in asking for a pay raise..." [7]

This is unacceptable. In their letter from the 3rd June the worker negotiators again announced their condemnation of the official union for its behaviour during the strike. They express anger at the union's fabrication of facts, in its letter to the workers, in the way that it claims credit for the management's offer to raise wages when in fact, as the workers argue, it is their action which has forced management to offer concessions. They conclude this section of their letter with the insistence, "that the workplace union must be elected by frontline workers." [8]

China's growth has been largely based on the exploitation of cheap labour. Coming at the same time as the much reported suicides at the Taiwan owned Foxconn electronics factory in Shenzhen, which have highlighted to the world the immense pressure, loneliness and feeling of isolation experienced

by many migrant workers who are made to work for long hours enduring bullying, miserable pay and working conditions, the action taken by the Honda workers shows that there is the potential to fight back against such an oppressive situation. In fact China has continued to witness a growing number of spontaneous strikes and collective action by workers in recent years. At the same time that Honda workers have been on strike, more than 1000 workers at a factory supplying parts for the Hyundai Motor company also went on strike for higher pay and better working hours in Beijing on the weekend of May 28th and 29th. They are reported to have returned to work after being promised a pay rise by their management. [9] As workers become more aware of their rights, the growth in collective action may be a sign that workers will not continue to sacrifice their lives and tolerate such treatment forever. The Honda strike has certainly become one of the longest and most significant reported strikes in recent history. The determination of this younger generation of workers not to passively follow in the footsteps of their parents, but rather to demand respect, fairer treatment and proper representation should be seen as a very welcome development. As the workers have explained, in a statement which is significant because it is most likely one of the first instances of workers in the private sector stating the need to fight and defend rights not just for themselves but for workers throughout the whole country:

“Our struggle to defend our rights is not just about fighting for ourselves, the 1800 workers of Honda. We are concerned about the rights of all the workers in the whole country. We want to set a good example of workers’ struggling for their rights. We have noticed that in this plant there are some dispatch workers who are not directly hired by Honda, but they are working along side us. We are aware that they are electing representatives to negotiate with the company. We support them whole heartedly! Meanwhile we also need the support of the media and the public. We express our sincere gratitude to all these support.” [10]

Bai Ruixue, 3rd June 2010

Footnotes

[1] Open letter by Honda Nanhai Worker representative, <http://www.sina.com.cn> June 3, 2010. It was quickly deleted from the website.

[2] Open letter by Honda Nanhai Worker representative, <http://www.sina.com.cn> June 3, 2010. <http://www.sina.com.cn>

[3] Honda Gains on Soaring China, India Sales, April 28 2010
<http://www.manufacturing.net/News-Honda-Gains-On-Soaring-China-India-Sales-042810.aspx>

[4] <http://bbs.ttx.cn/fm16/thread-318679-1-1.html>

[5] <http://bbs.ttx.cn/fm16/thread-318679-1-1.html>

[6] <http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/20100601/14388039091.shtml>

[7] Letter from Nanhai District Union to Honda Workers, 1st June 2010
<http://policy.caing.com/2010-06-02/100149369.html>

[8] <http://auto.sina.com.cn/news/2010-06-01/1627608675.shtml>

[9] See [Beijing : Striking workers get raises, aim to form labor union](#)

[10] Open letter by Honda Nanhai Worker representative, <http://www.sina.com.cn> June 3, 2010.