

Should the All-China Federation of Trade Unions join the ITUC ? Comment on Han Dongfang's view of the ACFTU

Monday 30 June 2014, by [AMRC](#), [BRANIGAN Tania](#), [Globalization Monitor](#), [HAN Dongfang](#), [Workers Empowerment](#) (Date first published: 27 July 2014).

This letter was sent to Guardian but the latter had not published it.

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On June 26, 2011, our friend Han Dongfang released a striking commentary in the *Guardian* arguing that the International Trade Union Confederation should “discuss affiliation with the ACFTU.” [See below] He called on the international trade unions to admit the Chinese official trade union, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), so as to help the latter to “better serve its members and eventually become a real trade union.” The reason he gives is that he sees signs of genuine reform within the ACFTU in representing workers' interests, stating that “already this year the ACFTU has introduced initiatives designed to boost workers' pay through negotiations with factory managers and business federation leaders.” He gives the example of the Nanhai Honda automotive plant's pay rise after the union negotiated with the management this March to illustrate his case. However, the negotiations in Honda since last June reveal openly the administrative power of the ACFTU granted by the state and the party. We are worried about the rapid replication of such an ends-oriented model of collective negotiation in China which is just to be strengthening the only official trade union institution while illegitimising workers' strikes and democratic elections of the trade union.

Certainly if lower level ACFTU officials begin to ask company managers to raise wages this is much better than when they do the otherwise. During the 2008-9 economic crisis, ACFTU either stood behind the local government's decision to freeze wages or allowed the business sector to stop paying contributions to social security funds. The change is too small a step, however, to be seen as a sign of an important and 'genuine' reform of the ACFTU. The achievement trumpeted by the ACFTU is not as a result of real collective bargaining. In fact the ACFTU's intention is clear when it describes what it promotes as jitixieshang (collective consultation), not jititanpan (collective bargaining), because the tone of 'bargaining' may suggest some kind of confrontation between employers and employees, which is deemed undesirable for the official trade union.

Even if one day the ACFTU does begin to acknowledge the term collective bargaining, this does not necessarily refer to an encouraging act in itself. The international trade union movement rests on three fundamental guiding principles: the freedom to form unions, the right to collective bargaining and the right to strike. Only when all three are recognised simultaneously, by the state and the employers, not only in words but in deeds, can each and every one of these rights be meaningful to the employees. In addition to this is the need to enjoy civil liberties, which are indispensable for the labour movement as well. In China, civil liberties are virtually absent. To argue that the ACFTU is

making headway in its reform and is better able to represent workers' interests, given this situation, is more like wishful thinking than an objective appreciation of reality.

The ACFTU might have occasionally taken some initiatives in promoting labour laws or made attempts at negotiation with employers for a pay rise at some companies, but this alone cannot compensate for what workers have lost. Workers are deprived of basic civil liberties in general and the three basic labour rights in particular. This means that when workers' legitimate interests are denied by unscrupulous employers, and when the judicial system is far from being impartial, workers remain defenceless because they are not allowed to stage any strike or protest to make their voices heard. This makes China an ideal place for capitalists.

Dongfang has faith in the ACFTU's reform, but our work on the ground shows that the workers think otherwise.

Workers explicitly respond that in reality, unions simply do not represent their interests and that when they consulted union officials on how to form a union, they were met with indifference and discouragement by all levels of the ACFTU. Our interview with workers concerning the implementation of the Labour Contract Law also shows that over 60% did not know that they were entitled to the right to ask the unions to "enter into collective contracts with enterprises" and unions fail to play a role in educating workers in this respect. Another survey with workers at Foxconn regarding the role and function of unions showed similar results. If there is a labour dispute, workers are unwilling to trust the unions due to the fact that many union leaders are part of the management themselves at companies.

Dongfang's comments have exaggerated, if not grossly overrated, the isolated moves of the ACFTU as a huge step forward, while forgetting the much broader picture of the continuous absence of basic rights in China, and in particular, the full right of workers to freely choose and recall their representatives at the workplace without retaliation. Thus, we do not think that Dongfang's view on the ACFTU would be embraced by the working masses in China.

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**Asia Monitor Resource Centre
Globalization Monitor
Worker Empowerment**

* <http://www.amrc.org.hk/node/1168>

China's main union is yet to earn its job

Strikes and riots are now pushing China's official trade union into properly defending workers' rights.

The workers' movement in China is at a critical juncture. As last year's wave of strikes and the recent migrant worker riots in Guangdong clearly demonstrate, workers are angry. They are demanding better pay and working conditions and an end to the social injustice and discrimination they see around them every day. But with no real trade union that can articulate those demands,

workers are left with little option but to take to the streets.

This new era of activism has forced China's official trade union, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, to re-examine its role and look for ways to become an organisation that really does represent workers' interests. Already this year the ACFTU has introduced initiatives designed to boost workers' pay through negotiations with factory managers and business federation leaders.

How should the international trade union movement respond to the changes in China? It has long been divided between those who refuse to talk to the ACFTU because it is not a real trade union and those who are willing to engage, but only on a superficial level, avoiding fundamental issues like freedom of association and collective bargaining because they think them too sensitive.

Times have clearly changed, and the approach of the international trade union movement needs to change too. It now has the perfect opportunity to reach out. Constructive engagement with the ACFTU at this point in history could produce real benefits - not just for the union itself but for China's workers' movement.

Some of the ACFTU's initiatives have already produced results. In March the union at the Nanhai Honda automotive plant in southern China negotiated a 30%-plus pay increase for production-line workers, with an agreement in principle to further increase wages in 2013. Only a year earlier, union officials from the local township had sided with management and beaten up workers striking for higher pay.

However, other schemes still betray the old bureaucratic habits of trade union officials more concerned with ticking boxes, meeting quotas and making speeches than actually doing anything concrete to help workers. Just last month, when a senior ACFTU official, Guo Chen, announced plans for collective wage negotiations in 95% of the Fortune 500 companies in China, he said the companies should not be worried because "unlike western unions, which always stand against the employer, Chinese unions are obliged to boost the corporation's development and maintain sound labour relations". To reassure bosses even further, Guo stated that mid-level managers, not production-line workers, should represent employees in negotiations.

Although some ACFTU officials are trying to make a positive impact, there are still many others who are reluctant to involve workers in negotiations. And until those officials can overcome their fear of workers and bring them into the collective bargaining process, they will be mere spectators rather than players in the workers' movement.

International trade unions, with their wealth of experience in genuine collective bargaining, can help the ACFTU better serve its members and eventually become a real trade union. In an increasingly globalised market, it is important that the world's largest workforce has a voice in the international union movement. The International Trade Union Confederation could grasp the nettle by discussing affiliation with the ACFTU. If, on the other hand, the Chinese union is excluded, it will probably just carry on making the same shortsighted mistakes that it has always made. Under increasing pressure from strike action by workers it may eventually work out how to be a genuinely representative trade union - but that process will take it much longer.

Of course any decision about the future direction of the ACFTU ultimately lies with the Communist Party of China. But the party's ideals are not set in stone; in today's market economy it has to be flexible, and officials are sometimes open to persuasion, especially on issues related to labour. If the ACFTU can show it can better serve the party's interests (ensuring economic growth and social stability) by standing up for the rights and interests of workers, the party will certainly take note.

Even the party, which in the past only had its own interests to consider, now has to listen to the voice of the workers, and to respond to their increasingly clear and angry calls for change.

Han Dongfang

* *The Guardian*, Sunday 26 June 2011 23.00 BST:

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jun/26/china-trade-union-global-movement>

Tiananmen Square activist gives support to China's official union

Organisation that has been criticised for failing to fight for workers now gets backing from dissident.

Han Dongfang: China's main union is yet to earn its job

A Chinese activist who helped create the country's first independent trade union has urged foreign labour campaigners to now embrace the country's much-criticised official body.

Han Dongfang set up the Beijing Autonomous Workers' Federation during the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square. It was broken up in the ensuing crackdown and he now works from exile in Hong Kong.

Han says the ban on autonomous bodies has left workers with no choice but to take to the streets over their grievances. Activists often complain that the official union, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), is more concerned with ensuring social stability and protecting businesses than fighting for the rights of the world's largest workforce.

But in a striking commentary for the Guardian, Han, director of the workers' rights organisation China Labour Bulletin, argues that a new era of worker activism has forced the ACFTU to look for ways to genuinely represent workers' interests, such as helping to negotiate pay rises.

"Times have clearly changed, and the approach of the international trade union movement needs to change too," he writes.

His remarks follow fresh unrest among workers, including riots and strikes in the Pearl river delta, the country's manufacturing heartland. Fast-rising food prices and broader concerns about their treatment by officials have exacerbated grievances over wages and conditions.

Han argues that the increasingly globalised market makes it vital to give China's hundreds of millions of workers a voice and says the International Trade Union Confederation should discuss affiliation with the ACFTU.

He suggests experienced overseas unions could help it to serve its members better "and eventually become a real trade union".

While the Communist party will determine its development, even the party now has to listen and respond to workers' "increasingly clear and angry calls for change," he concludes.

Tania Branigan in Beijing

* *The Guardian*, Sunday 26 June 2011 23.24 BST

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/26/tiananmen-activist-china-official-union>
