

The End of an Era: Labor Activism in Early 21st Century China

Monday 24 April 2023, by [Chuang, Wen \(China\)](#) (Date first published: 24 April 2023).

The intake below was written by Wen, a comrade from mainland China who was active in labor-support work there throughout the first two decades of the 21st century. Most of it was originally written in January 2020, just after the last labor activists of the 2010s had been detained, forced to go even further underground, or otherwise prevented from continuing with many of the activities they had previously focused on. Then the pandemic put everything on hold for a couple years. Over the past few months, Wen revised and updated the article through a series of conversations with us about the implications of the original draft, as well as of the various forms of activism and labor struggle that sprang up throughout the pandemic, especially in 2022 and the early months of this year.

Contents

- [The End of an Era: Labor \(...\)](#)
- [The Late 2010s Repression](#)
- [The Peak of a Cycle](#)
- [Activist Milieux](#)
- [Types of Involvement in \(...\)](#)
- [End of the Cycle](#)
- [A New Cycle of Labor Struggle?](#)

One of these more recent waves of proletarian unrest has continued since January of 2023 until the time of writing, [led by retirees against changes to the social insurance system](#)—including cuts to medical benefits and proposals to raise the retirement age. We believe it is no coincidence that this wave has roughly coincided with the [movement](#) against comparable reforms in France: both respond to capital's global push to cut the costs of social reproduction as the population ages and economic growth continues to stagnate. It seems unlikely these scattered protests will cohere into a nationwide movement before the state snuffs them out with its standard combination of carrot and stick tactics, but these and many other struggles from the past three years do support our thesis (first proposed in our 2015 article "[No Way Forward, No Way Back](#)" then updated in subsequent writings such as "[Picking Quarrels](#)") that China has begun an intensification of conflicts in the sphere of social reproduction, overlapping with and overspilling "labor" struggles in the traditional sense. In this regard, the trends seen in China since the early 2010s are in line with [those in many other countries](#), reflecting a deeper unfolding of the "[general law of capitalist accumulation](#)."



Structural changes in employment have induced similar changes in political subjectivity and the ensuing activity of proletarians in China. This dual shift provides context for the decline of the form of labor activism explored in Wen's article below—a form that, we would emphasize, never existed in China before the 2000s and may never exist again. [1] In addition to highlighting this context, we would also like to further clarify our understanding of the relationship between industrial struggles and labor activists already suggested by Wen's article. First, the specialized sort of labor activists discussed here were only ever directly involved in a fraction of the countless industrial struggles that mostly sprang up “spontaneously” (although often organized by militant workers with no connection to activist networks) throughout the first two decades of the 21st century. Second, as another former activist put it, “It was the collective actions of Chinese workers (especially those in the coastal manufacturing sector) that attracted the activists and pushed them to advance together with the workers, rather than those activists with different backgrounds and worldviews driving the workers' actions. However, the activists... did play a definite role in the formation of the workers' own internal organizing networks, providing a foundation for [some of their later] actions.”

This article is therefore an important contribution to our continuing analysis of China's mass struggles and left interventions, as well as a sort of obituary for a historically distinct form of intervention whose era has now ended. Along with the author, we hope that a frank autopsy of the labor activist movement will provide lessons for the present generation of proletarians initiating new forms of resistance more appropriate to current conditions. Though there may be some minor disagreements between our own position and that laid out below, the piece is an invaluable first-hand insight into a crucial moment in the history of class struggle in China.

Chuang

The End of an Era: Labor Activism in early 21st century China

Wen

The passing of years and decades creates arbitrary temporal boundaries that rarely align with the rhythm of social and political change. The end of the 2010s, however, appears to have definitively signaled the end of an era. The mass arrests of Jasic factory organizers and student supporters, of unrelated labor activists in 2018 and 2019, and the closing down of labor groups, radical student societies and activist networks over the same period, sealed the decade on a distinctly pessimistic note. We know that the labor activist scene we had become so familiar with—the actors, organizations, networks as well as their goals and methods of organizing—has evaporated and is unlikely to return. But what, exactly, was this scene?

The Late 2010s Repression

The first draft of this article was completed in the early days of 2020, on the heels of a two-year period of relentless repression. The focus of the original draft on that crackdown, who was arrested, why and what it all meant, reflected the mood and perspective of that particular moment. It is worth preserving that pivotal moment that precipitated this analysis.

2019 opened with the January detention of five of China's most prominent remaining labor activists (finally released sixteen months later in May 2020), and the year ended with the December detention of another three (surprisingly released after just fifteen days). In between, however, a number of other labor activists, including independent journalists and social workers, disappeared into the security state for months at a time, joining those detained in previous years. Most, if not all, of those detained have been released—often quietly, with conditions of their release usually including vows to keep silent and cut off contact with the outside world. By 2020, such arbitrary arrests (with equally arbitrary lengths of detention) had become so frequent that there would be a collective sigh of relief if no one was arrested for a few months. While we inevitably speculated whether any given arrest was related to another, by 2020 there were enough such incidents to believe that the specific cause of any individual case was no longer important.

With hindsight, the year 2019 marked an inflection point where this new approach of state repression became firmly established. Policing became more preemptive, aiming less to punish activists for what they had done and more to prevent them from what they might be preparing to do next. With each layer of activists arrested, interrogated or tightly surveilled, the next layer became more exposed, in an ever-expanding concentric circle of repression. The subsequent two years, from 2020 through 2022, only confirmed this trend. In 2021, at least two labor activists were arrested separately and both charged for the more serious crime of “subverting state power” (颠覆国家政权). While the number of activists and organizations targeted has declined in the years since 2019, this reflects not a relaxation so much as the normalization of a new terrain where very few activists have been able to take action in any public or organized way. Meanwhile, short of formal police detention, countless activists and students have been taken away and questioned on a more regular basis. We are still living in the shadow of the late 2010s crackdown.

As this repression recedes into the rearview, it is not enough to mourn what has been lost. Before we can move on and try to forge something appropriate to the “new era,” we must first clarify what exactly it was that rose and fell throughout the first two decades of the 21st century. On the one hand, the arrests of 2019 marked the last nails in the coffin of a cycle of labor struggles led by migrant workers from rural areas, at first mainly in the coastal cities' new export-oriented factories and infrastructure projects, but eventually expanding throughout China's burgeoning private sector as a whole. This migrant-led cycle had begun with sporadic labor actions in the mid-1990s, taken shape throughout the 2000s, and intensified in the early 2010s, only to dissolve from 2015 onwards—well before the last wave of crackdowns on specialized activists, who can now be understood as engaged in last-ditch efforts to revive the earlier class militancy. It had waxed just as another cycle of labor struggles had begun to wane: that of urban state-sector workers who had fought unsuccessfully to defend their socialist “iron rice bowl” against market-oriented restructuring from the early 1990s to the late 2000s, peaking around 2002. The migrant-led cycle was defined not only by its own intrinsic arc of labor actions, but also by the networks of specialized activists and organizations that emerged from the mid-2000s through the mid-2010s in an effort to support and direct the workers' actions, as well as by certain ideas about what was permissible, assumptions about how best to organize (fellow) workers, and understandings about their short-, middle- and long-term goals. Now that this cycle has been buried, and it is still unclear how the next will emerge from the current context of “political depression” (政治抑郁, a phrase that has been on the lips of many former activists over the past couple years), we have a responsibility to honor the dead by taking stock of the early 21st century cycle of migrant-led labor struggles. Much has already been written about the work, life and struggles of Chinese migrant workers themselves, [2] so instead this essay focuses on the milieu of activists that emerged from and sometimes influenced workers' struggles. In doing so, I reject the widespread notion that repression has been driven primarily by the authoritarian personality of Xi Jinping. Instead, I want to show that this cycle of struggles had its own inner logic and rhythm related to broader material trends at the time.

We are beginning to see a new generation of activists struggling to emerge against the worst possible odds, and deprived of the infrastructure and knowledge of the recent past—but also free from some of its historical and ideological burdens. In this, we should also be looking for how the coming cycle may diverge from the previous two.

The Peak of a Cycle

While the starting point of this cycle of labor struggle can be traced back to the late 1990s, its upper plateau spanned just over a decade from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s. This period was infused with high hopes. The 2010s opened with a milestone strike in the summer of 2010, the extensively researched Nanhai Honda auto parts factory strike, widely portrayed as representing the coming-of-age of the new Chinese working class. [3] A wave of autoworkers' strikes soon followed, and later that year a strike of more than 70,000 workers in the Dalian industrial zone capped what could have been termed a Year of the Worker. [4]

Those larger strikes had been preceded by years of intensifying labor struggle in the Pearl River Delta, which had forced the state to pass labor legislations—rather progressive by international labor law standards, on paper—in the late 2000s as concessions in a bid for industrial peace. For a few years, the government appeared at least nominally to be on the side of workers' legal rights, if for no other reason than to secure support for the socioeconomic foundation of its capitalist development model. In retrospect, however, the Honda strike marked not the turn from defensive to offensive, more expansive and increasingly organized workers' struggles, as many believed at the time, but merely the peak of a cycle of still mainly defensive and localistic struggles—which would only decline in subsequent years.

In the next five years after the Honda strike, each year saw significant developments, either in the form of large and consequential strikes that had wider impacts beyond the factories, such as the 40,000-strong Yue Yuen shoe factory strike in Dongguan (2014), or in the form of labor news that galvanized widespread public sympathy, such as the Foxconn suicides (2010-2014). Workers and activists were never free from harassment and surveillance. Thugs were hired to assault striking workers, police regularly harassed and held activists for questioning, and labor NGOs were forced to relocate their offices. But activists responded to these new developments optimistically and actively, discussing how best to intervene. The state sought to quell labor unrest with legislation and matching pro-labor rhetoric, showing a willingness to partner with labor NGOs in a marriage of convenience in order to gain workers' consent to the emerging, more regulated industrial relations system that was slowly taking shape. The state tolerated labor NGOs for their service work, while monitoring and delineating the parameters of their activities, in subtle or not-so-subtle ways.

There was more than a dose of unjustified optimism among many participants and observers of workers' struggles about the inevitability of a growing and more organized labor movement emerging from the actual density of workers' struggles. While the classical Euro-American labor movement was more historically specific than is often recognized, [5] activists, academics and even some reformist All-China Federation of Trade Union (ACFTU) leaders for years looked to Europe and the U.S. for China's own future path. From the vantage point of the early 2010s, even as the political space prohibited any autonomous union activity, few believed that the possibility of workers developing into a strong union movement was entirely foreclosed [6] On the contrary, the horizon of struggles appeared open, and it seemed that they could take many directions. It felt certain that it was not a question of "if" but "in what direction" and "when" workers would develop strong forms of labor organization. That excitement, bordering on a sense of inevitability, may be hard to recall today, but it was pervasive for many years.

Activist Milieux

Within this cycle, two generations of activists emerged, became shaped by and in turn influenced other labor actions. It was in the context of the strong collective actions of the late 2000s and early 2010s that some of China's most militant labor activists, who were some of the primary targets of repression between 2015 and 2019, crafted their organizing skills almost from scratch. They had been largely cut off from previous generations of activists, such as the militant workers in China's state-owned factories of the 1990s and early 2000s, some of whom faced particularly harsh repression for their role in resisting privatization and closures. The first of these new activists came onto the scene just as state-sector workers' struggles were winding down in the late 1990s. The later generation emerged in the early 2010s, well after such battles had been lost.

This new crop of activists was far from homogenous. I focus on three groupings with distinct characteristics that played notable roles in organizing and trying to build a labor movement. [7]

First, the first generation of migrant labor activists could be called the "*grassroots migrant*" grouping, centered in the Pearl River Delta cities of Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Dongguan, which were still industrializing rapidly in the 1990s and 2000s. Members of this grouping share broadly similar backgrounds as former migrant workers, having left their rural hometowns to work on the coast in those two decades. Some founded their own labor organizations or joined established ones, although many also operated as unaffiliated organizers. Many emerged as the public faces of China's new "labor movement." Few were college educated, and most of their organizations were staffed by former grassroots workers, and to a lesser extent by college graduates. They tended to be ideologically amorphous, often mixing their championing of workers' interests with anti-authoritarianism alongside pro-market politics that may look incoherent today, but which have been fairly common in postsocialist countries. Among those who were more politically sophisticated, a few looked to some undefined version of European social democracy as the desirable future for Chinese workers, and were generally opposed to forms of socialism overlain with authoritarian domination. Many worked with academics interested in industrial relations, and with lawyers sympathetic to their causes and willing to take the risk of representing workers in moderately sensitive cases. This tended to orient the milieu toward the incremental modernization of the legal system to be free from state interference, and toward a conception of industrial relations centered on ILO-style tripartite collective bargaining. Despite their moderate politics, however, their backgrounds as migrant workers, their more organized character, their connections to foreign funding via international foundations, and the breadth of their emerging networks all ensured that they would be perceived as threats to the state. This meant that they were often the first victims of repression.

Second was the "*civil society*" grouping. This milieu had been shaped by the development of civil society both as a conceptual framework for their actions and as a reality dominant in Guangzhou—a reality which had developed out of liberal-leaning universities in the city, the commercializing media, and in connection with civil society activists just across the border checkpoints in Hong Kong. Most of these labor activists leading NGOs would not have identified themselves as left-leaning or radical, although in practice they were not necessarily hostile to the more explicitly left-wing positions of students and workers who sometimes volunteer or work for them or with whom they collaborated. They shared the social and political liberalism that flourished alongside the reformist turn of the Guangdong government in the early 2010s under provincial party secretary Wang Yang. Many were politicized while attending local universities, often through involvement in volunteer societies, exposure to the liberal media, or participation in activities such as performance art and small-scale demonstrations. Because of the more permissive environment, they had the chance to participate in the many civil society organizations that existed in these years, forming networks with activists working on a range of other social and political issues. Some of them would

eventually choose to work for such organizations, while others continued along the academic path, sometimes maintaining ties to civil society.

Finally, there was a “*radical left*” grouping that first emerged mainly in Beijing. This grouping was based among explicitly Marxist students and recent graduates, often taking the form of “study groups” that were strongly influenced by a version of Maoism that had developed within some of the country’s more elite universities. This Maoism was less a coherent political program than a nostalgia for and defense of Mao Zedong and those of his policies perceived to be progressive and pro-worker. Often influenced by these students’ professors and older Maoist-leaning networks, usually connected with old state-sector workers who had lost their livelihood and felt cheated by the restructuring of the 1990s, the ideological training of these student radicals usually preceded their labor activism. Many started to orient themselves toward labor organizing in the process of their ideological training, guided by more senior student radicals. These groups tended to become ideologically uniform and highly disciplined, often conducting inquiries (targeting campus staff or workers at nearby factories or construction sites) to learn about organizing and to build student-worker alliances. In doing so, they posed a double threat to the state with their ideological heterodoxy and these cross-class alliances. But it was only later that their activity, mainly limited to discussions and some rudimentary forms of organizing, was taken seriously by the state. One turning point came in late 2017, when the authorities detained a number of student activists, collectively known as [Eight Young Leftists](#) (八位青年左派), who had organized reading groups and outreach to students and workers in Guangzhou (some of them having relocated from Beijing to that former hotbed of migrant struggles in the Pearl River Delta for this purpose). [8] Even though they were subsequently released, apparently with the intervention of former left-leaning leaders in the party, this put Marxist students in general on the state’s radar. Possibly due to their base in elite universities (as college students have usually been treated more leniently than workers and non-student activists), no serious, nationwide crackdown took place until the [Jasic Affair](#) of 2018 and its aftermath the following year. [9] Since then, college students have been monitored much more closely.

Disconnected from China’s earlier labor traditions, emerging at a high tide of global civil society movements that encouraged the formation of non-governmental organizations, and against the background of state suppression of independent unionism, the main organizational form of labor activism has been that of the NGO. The first two groupings largely worked within this framework. These NGOs, though not entirely homogenous, never developed into anything comparable to mass organizations, such as historic trade unions or political parties, nor should we have expected them to.

While the “civil society” and “radical left” groupings diverged ideologically, they largely shared a common background. They both belonged to roughly the same generation of college-educated, idealistic and committed youth. Many of them attended China’s highest ranked universities in Guangdong and Beijing in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Their education at elite universities would have given them a good start in life, if not necessarily a life of comfort and status. But they had not necessarily come from elite families. Many had been influenced by their rural and migrant family backgrounds, and therefore identified with the underprivileged migrant working class immiserated in factories and on construction sites. The upsurge of new workers’ struggles in the second half of the 2000s and the early 2010s, with the Honda strike and the Foxconn suicides being two pivotal events, further radicalized these students. However, *where* it was (Beijing vs. Guangzhou) that they became radicalized may have been as important as *what* it was (e.g. labor struggle) that radicalized them. In practice, there was also considerable overlap between the “grassroots migrant” and “civil society” groupings as they came to occupy the same political space in the form of labor NGOs despite their very different personal backgrounds. I make this point to highlight that on the ground and over time, the relationships between the different groupings evolved, sometimes growing apart

or even becoming hostile to one another, while at other times collaborating and maintaining alliances.

Types of Involvement in Labor Struggles

To understand the significance of the late 2010s repression targeting these specialized activists and support networks in relation to China's broader world of labor struggles (in only a small portion of which such activists were ever involved, although those struggles sometimes became more significant due to factors such as media attention), it is useful to draw on the typology of strikes—and the kinds of participants associated with each type—developed by Parry Leung in his research on strikes and labor activism in south China's jewelry sector: [\[10\]](#)

Type-I strike—spontaneous strike: A mass action that is spontaneous in nature, without an organizer or any preparation; it lacks strategic planning, and worker representatives to negotiate with the management.

Type-II strike—activist-led strike (one-off action): Planned and organized by a handful of labor activists and supported by the general workers; informal negotiations between the management and the worker representatives but reaching no formal agreement. Worker activists face retaliation and dismissal shortly after a strike. Activists' organizing core is usually dissolved or dismantled after a strike.

Type-III strike—activist-led strike (with a sustained activist core): The strike is not a one-off incident. The activist-core leading the strike/protest action has experience in initiating strike(s) before. The worker activist-core network is able to initiate or provide support to strike actions repeatedly. The activist-core is led by "quasi-leader(s)."

Type-III strike can be further divided into two subtypes:

Type-IIIA—the sustained activist-core is a cross-factory activist network: Cross-factory collaboration of activists; activists' organizing structure can be sustained after the strike action, but it is operated inside a particular factory. The activists-core is formed by worker activists from different factories.

Type-IIIB—The sustained activist-core is maintained inside a particular factory: The activist-core can sustain and operate inside the factory after the strike, usually with election of worker representatives during the strike and formal written agreements after negotiations.

Type-IV strike—leader-led strike (nonexistent in China now): An organized labor movement, cross-factory or cross regional actions promoting class-based interests of workers, can state a clear vision of the movement to the worker community. The movement leaders have the resolution to put the vision into practice.

It appears that most strikes in China during this cycle of struggles fell into the first two types: spontaneous strikes and activist-led ones (one-off actions). In some cases, they developed into the third type: activist-led strikes (with a sustained activist core), which sustained networks but still within one workplace. The last type, spanning multiple factories and regions, did not yet exist in China (with a few possible exceptions such as the aforementioned 2010 strike wave and the 2018

nationwide strikes by [crane operators](#) and [truck drivers](#)), as Leung noted.

However, I argue that the three activist groupings, each in their own ways and with varied successes and failures, tried to build the last type of struggle, conceived as a step toward building a labor movement, instead of a collection of unrelated strike activities. In the years leading up to the final repression, the “grassroots migrant” and “civil society” groupings focused on promoting their versions of collective bargaining and a system of worker representatives (less an invention than an adaption by some NGOs and labor lawyers of an emerging trend among workers’ struggles where workers had initiated *ad hoc* forms of negotiation with managers) to formalize worker representation, and while the various organizations did not often get along, they were becoming a network, in a broad sense, with broadly shared goals and methods. The “radical left” grouping, too, had become more organized in their approach to building a student-worker alliance to radicalize labor struggles ideologically, also growing their networks not just on university campuses but also inside the factories (Jasic being only the most well-known example of many attempts by students and other left activists to embed themselves in a factory).

Though these activists often overstated their own importance and level of success in all these endeavors, their influence was not negligible. Activists from all three groupings played an instrumental role in cohering the labor struggle at a larger scale by connecting workers from different workplaces and sectors, putting them in touch with activists and student support groups elsewhere, all in an attempt to retain and transfer experiences between momentary strikes, and to guide the strategy of workers in their struggles. Efforts to cohere the struggle in organized ways through networks became the focal point of repression over the last several years. These networks have indeed been swept aside. In opposition to the idea that the repression was the result of the authoritarian personality of Xi Jinping or any other state leaders, a key factor driving the repression, and one explanation of its timing, may be that the activist groupings were actually moving toward cohering the second and third types of strike into the fourth: something more closely resembling a “labor movement.”

However, there were far too few such activists to consolidate the struggles into a movement and their record of organically cultivating leadership out of these struggles—among workers themselves—was generally poor. The activist groups remained mostly efforts of “outside” intervention, as became evident in the Jasic Affair. The few exceptions to this were wiped out before they had any chance to take root. This reflects a recognition that labor insurgency in itself has a much lower chance of developing into an organized movement if the state is able to suppress labor organizers and organizations. The increasing restriction of academic research heavily in labor studies, also denied academic space for discussing labor organizing strategy.

The Chinese state is usually able to manage labor unrest organized by workers acting alone, but has been especially vigilant about outside agitators. The suppression of labor activists has not deterred workers from striking, however, since workplace organizing has rarely depended primarily on such activists. In migrants’ wildcat strikes and protests since the 1990s, workers have only rarely been detained *en masse*. [11] In part, this is because without a union or other organization leading the strike, those ringleaders that have existed often emerge organically and change over time rather than being formally selected, so that identifying them by the authorities has never been an easy task. Yet the chance of them being targeted for intensive repression increases significantly whenever any ringleaders that the authorities identify also organized beyond their own workplaces—even if concessions are sometimes made to the striking workers themselves to pacify the strike.

In highlighting these activist groupings, I do not mean to suggest they represent workers’ struggles or are even the most important factors in shaping the struggle. After all, for the last two decades, workers’ struggles in China did not rely on external organizers to organize strikes. Workers within

their own workplaces, mobilizing through personal and hometown networks, organized themselves in collective actions. Such self-organization, which labor organizers in more deindustrialized economies today could only envy, was both a blessing as a form of direct labor-capital struggle unmediated by union bureaucracy, and, without any organizational consolidation, also a barrier to the class's development as an organized force. Nevertheless, the activists were trying, in their own ways, to push the cycle of struggles in particular directions.

End of the Cycle

This cycle of labor struggle, however, was coming to an end by the mid-2010s. It was not at all self-evident at the time. In fact, the years 2013 and 2014 saw some of the largest strikes since the state-sector struggles of the early 2000s, and the academic discourse around the time spoke of the transition from defensive to offensive labor struggles. However, China's industrialization (defined in terms of industrial employment as a share of the labor force) peaked around 2013, right around the time when worker struggle also reached a peak, followed by deindustrialization manifest evidently in the closure and relocation of manufacturing from hubs such as the Pearl River Delta toward the hinterland as well as outside of China. The nature of industrial actions, including some of the largest strikes, turned defensive in such events, demanding better severance compensation and unpaid pension contributions from employers. Even with victories, such actions rarely built a sustained struggle. In other words, the decline and finally the end of this cycle of labor struggle in the second half of 2010s was conditioned by the structural economic and employment changes underway.

The decade of hope and excitement quickly gave way to disappointment and then despair. In the context of the general decline and end of the cycle, the tide of repression had swept away all three groupings by 2020. The space that all of them had shared to different degrees in the early 2010s, in which they had learned and practiced their activism, vanished rapidly after 2015. The arrests in 2019 merely marked the culmination of that decade's downward spiral. Some of it was foreshadowed as early as 2012, when the Shenzhen government harassed landlords in order to force labor NGOs to relocate their offices. As shocking as it was at the time, when we retroactively compare it to what was on the horizon this indirect suppression was almost quaint, clearly intended to do nothing more than send a warning and aimed at disrupting but not stopping the activists' work. The criminalization of labor activism that began in 2015 marked a qualitative jump.

The intensification started in earnest in the early months of 2015 amid a wave of crackdowns on other types of activism. First to fall were the [Feminist Five](#), detained on March 6 for their plan to launch a campaign against sexual assault on public transport on Women's Day two days later. [12] This was followed by a broad sweep targeting activists in the Yirenping network beginning in late March (who worked primarily against discrimination but also employed some of the feminists arrested earlier the same month), the detention of more than 200 human rights activists and lawyers on July 9, and finally on December 5 the first mass arrests of Guangzhou-based labor activists. [13] To what extent were these crackdowns linked? On the one hand, cross-fertilization among such organizations and networks might have precipitated a holistic sweep targeting multiple sectors of civil society. But there was also a unique context for the case of the crackdown against labor activists, since 2014 and 2015 had seen the emergence of massive strikes around social insurance payments and factory relocations, which were particularly militant and difficult to diffuse because of workers' desperation and determination. [14] Moreover, some of the labor NGOs had intervened in the strikes, seeing an opportunity to push for a stronger role of workers' voices in industrial bargaining. In the initial case, the Lide shoe factory strike, that led to the detention of Guangzhou labor NGO activists, some of them had helped workers organize themselves into a quasi-union structure and aided them in strike organizing that led to months of continuous disruption and

negotiations with management. [15] These NGOs specifically rejected intervention by the local government and the government-affiliated union. At that time, the ACFTU, as part of the state structure and working closely with the local government in handling worker unrest, had found itself in a losing competitive relationship with labor NGOs when it came to gaining workers' trust and representing them in large-scale labor dispute cases.

The repression in 2015 set a precedent for criminalizing rights-based labor activism, which had, for the most part, suffered nothing more than police harassment in the past. The effects of the trials held in 2016 against three of the targeted labor activists reverberated well into 2016 and early 2017, when the introduction of the Foreign NGO Management Law made everyone even more nervous about their safety. (China is not alone in introducing such laws to securitize against its perceived foreign influences: among the major powers, Russia introduced one in 2014, and India in 2020.) The law was designed to block the flow of international funds to Chinese civil society organizations (on which they had come to depend heavily) and also created a legal basis and political legitimacy for future claims that activist interventions were linked to foreign interests. The law went into effect in January of 2017. Then, in the same year, three factory investigators affiliated with the New York-based China Labor Watch were detained briefly in the middle of an investigation into a shoe factory producing for Ivanka Trump's brand. [16] For a moment, the event raised concerns over the criminalization of factory investigations, which many labor groups both in and outside of China conduct to gather information on working conditions. At the end of the year, as mass evictions targeted migrant workers in Beijing and elsewhere, groups and individuals assisting the evicted migrants were themselves subject to harassment and received stern warnings from the authorities. [17] Around the same time, the Eight Young Leftists mentioned above were either detained or forced into hiding. That was the first major crackdown on student radicals. The decade was capped by the crackdown on the Jasic factory organizers in Shenzhen and their student supporters throughout the nation that began in the summer of 2018 and continued well into mid-2019, engulfing hundreds of activists and leftists of all stripes, including many unconnected to the campaign.

Beyond this, the past few years have seen other labor groups shut down and silenced in a quieter fashion, without arrests and, therefore without much public awareness. Activists, who until a few years ago had faced relatively low levels of risk beyond police harassment and questioning, now faced the serious threat of months of detention and criminal trials, sharply increasing the risks for anyone engaging in activism. In the limited number of cases in 2020 and 2021, the charges also scaled up across the board to the more serious "subversion of state power." Nor does this even begin to include the many workers who are regularly detained for various lengths of time for their protest activities, but generally not put on trial, and whose names we rarely learn. Each year after 2015 has been characterized by a growing sense of breathlessness, a feeling that things have been getting worse and worse without any sign of hope on the horizon.

The state's fundamental approach to governance seems to have shifted sometime around 2014 and 2015. In those years, it became clear that the government was no longer interested in dancing with rights groups and doling out just enough incremental reform to keep up people's hopes. What was believed to be an inexorable process of political liberalization was proven to be a passing moment in the evolution of the state's approach to governing China. Many accounts of the shift point to the transition between the Hu-Wen administration and the Xi administration after 2012. This reduction of large-scale political and economic events into a simple narrative focusing on political intrigue and the stratagems of statesmen is a common trope in writing on Chinese history and in mainstream reporting on politics in China today. This sort of oversimplification is common in both English and Chinese analysis. The core narrative is cultivated by the propaganda apparatus in both China and the West, since it serves the interests of the ruling class in both places. But changes at this scale can

almost never be reduced to the decisions of political leadership, since these decisions are themselves responses to problems that exceed the scale of court intrigue. The rise in repression cannot be reduced to the authoritarian personality of Xi Jinping.

In hindsight, “civil society” was specific to a particular period of China’s development wherein economic “opening-up” necessitated and benefited from relative political openness, and the state found it useful to endorse rights groups’ support for migrant workers to fill in the gaps of the government’s provision of welfare and legal services. Furthermore, it was thought that increasing workers’ wages peacefully through collective bargaining coordinated by the ACFTU, as opposed to wage increases occurring regardless through disorderly workers’ strikes, offered a solution to boosting domestic consumption. This economic context is essential to understanding the logic behind these decisions. The short decade from the early 2000s until the global financial crisis in 2008 registered some of the fastest economic growth rates, and the initial slowdown after the crisis was then moderated by the stimulus. But as growth rates continued to slide downward with the returns on the stimulus diminishing, state support for labor rights protection was withdrawn and repression picked up. Nor was this just a matter of increased repression targeting labor activism. As the economic foundation of its rule began to shake, the Chinese state became fixated on reasserting control over dissent in an array of social arenas.

While the repression of labor activists has generally been less severe than that targeting certain other groups such as human rights lawyers, it has both lowered the threshold for detention and widened the net to envelop more types of labor activists and leftists, now including students in support of worker organizing as well as social media journalists. Long-term imprisonment and the filing of criminal charges has not been the main tool here. Instead, most have simply been “detained” for a prolonged period of time, during which they are largely inaccessible to families, lawyers or the outside world. Some are then held on criminal charges but without trials for months or even longer. Others end up being transferred to an unknown location for an extended period of time, a notorious method referred to as “residential surveillance at a designated location” (RSDL). This slow-burn repression avoids the inevitable spectacle and outrage of harsh public sentencing and exhausts any solidarity campaigns and media interests by dragging the process out for months without any new development, all while accomplishing the same goal. The result is widespread fear and despair.

Further exacerbating the pessimism is the general absence of solidarity from within mainland China. In the past, when such arrests would occur, other activist, leftist or academic groups would immediately spring up to express anger, sign statements and publicly condemn such harassment, calling for the activists’ release. But the years since 2018 have seen little of this. After several years of sustained assaults, the labor activist networks are so intimidated that they can no longer rally around detained activists without themselves fearing a visit from the police or even detention. Meanwhile, the continued surveillance and harassment of those who have been released is aimed at disabling them as activists. What is left of a once hopeful labor activist scene is today almost unrecognizable. In this regard, the Chinese government has succeeded in increasing the costs of being an advocate even within legal limits. With support on the mainland increasingly hollowed out, the center of solidarity shifted to more distant international networks, in addition to the more traditional base in Hong Kong. After the 2019 protest movement in Hong Kong, the cascading measures by the region’s government to persecute and criminalize activists has now also affected organizations that focus only or mostly on social issues in mainland China, including several of the Hong Kong-based labor NGOs as well as the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU)—the latter being forced to disband in 2021. It has become exceedingly difficult for Hong Kong-based activists to organize solidarity for their mainland counterparts as they had done for the previous two decades, eroding what had long been the strongest bastion of external support for

activists on the mainland.

The crumbling of the edifice of a civil society within only a few short years also brutally sheds light on the fact that these groupings fundamentally failed to develop any strong social base, without which they had no leverage to defend against state repression. Many labor activists had undoubtedly been trying to build their social base, but the outcome was uneven and, on the whole, limited by both self-constraint and state suppression. Despite years of efforts to build workers' networks, these groups ultimately proved unable to take root and embed themselves deeply in the working-class communities where they had tried to set up shop. At one extreme, the radical students centered in Beijing were less connected in every sense with the working class, in contrast to those in Guangzhou and Shenzhen. To remedy this, some chose "industrialization" as a strategy, taking factory jobs with the goal of organizing workers. But this kind of ideological intervention ran the risk of going further than what workers were prepared to go. It tended to substitute the students' ideological zeal for workers' activism and ended up isolating the activists both from their coworkers and from any potential base of support outside the university. Others such as the liberal-left-leaning civil society activists, as well as the more seasoned grassroots activists with migrant worker backgrounds, mostly operated as labor NGOs and quasi-NGOs in Guangdong. These activists were more embedded geographically and organically within the working class. But most were limited by the service model of their NGOs, which focused on helping workers more than empowering them to organize. A familiar paradox emerged in which the most thoroughly rooted organizations with the greatest number of worker participants were also the least political, while the most ideologically conscious groups, such as the "industrializing" students, were almost entirely unsuccessful in building an effective base among workers. Ultimately, in the most successful cases, Guangdong NGOs were able to develop workers' networks but never anything like mass organizations. The few that had or at least had begun to move toward an organizing model were shut down shortly after they began to have a significant impact on workers' struggles. This means that in the face of state repression, workers could not be mobilized in large numbers to support the labor activists facing assault by the state.

Temporality matters. The postsocialist [18] migrant workers' struggles only emerged, with little connection to prior labor traditions, in the 1990s and spanned less than three decades. In contrast, the resistance of state-sector workers against privatization and factory closures in the 1990s and early 2000s bore more resemblance to a "labor movement" than the later migrant actions, even at their height. This is because the state-sector workers had built up organizational capacity and a certain group identity supported by a state ideology through generations of experience, beginning at least since the 1950s—and in some cases stretching from before 1949—with a strong regional character centered on the northeast. By contrast, the cycle of migrant struggles reached a less dramatic peak and then declined more quickly, and this was not simply a result of state repression. It also reflected the shorter period of their proletarianization and integration into new industrial sectors (especially the private export-processing sector), which reached their own regional peaks of employment within two decades after they had begun—beginning to decline along with China's manufacturing employment as a whole in the early 2010s. This pattern is similar to those that have played out in many other countries as well, with comparable effects on proletarian struggles. [19] Since the type of labor activism we have been discussing here emerged on the back of migrant struggles in the coastal export-processing zones, it should come as no surprise that such activism was not able to survive state repression at a time when it was also losing its own material foundation.

As we witnessed the end of a cycle of Chinese workers' struggles, we are left with the fact that the workers' struggle never consolidated itself organizationally or politically and therefore had little left to cling to when the tide of strikes seemed to phase out. We have to face the fact that the immediate

future is bleak. The organizations and networks developed over many years would themselves take years to rebuild. But on top of this, the political space in which to do so is simply no longer present, with increasing ideological control in academia precisely aimed at rooting out prospective activists. We are faced with the possibility of losing two generations of Chinese activists who devoted their lives to bettering society. Some of the best are and have been in detention and others have been under such close watch that even very small actions can lead to harassment if not repeated detentions. This is particularly true for the minority of activist groups that had been successful in cultivating organic leadership among workers. Those who stayed in China and have not given up have to reckon with increasingly difficult choices involving huge personal risks.

Some of assumptions in the last cycle of labor struggle need to be reconsidered. The idea of the industrial working class rising up at the start of the decade has also been shaken. Industrial workers still comprise a significant fraction of China's proletariat even as the nation gradually deindustrializes, and their collective power should not be underestimated. We have been surprised time and again, just as we turn pessimistic, when a new wave of factory workers' strikes has suddenly erupted. But in the context of the structural changes in employment and the rise of the service sector, industrial struggle has been pushed more and more into the background. This has also been reflected in academic research, which has followed the trend and now conducts studies of service workers, industrial upgrading and the platform economy. This is not only a change of focus, however, but also a more fundamental switch of perspective, moving away from looking at labor through the lens of industrial struggles.

A New Cycle of Labor Struggle?

The 2020s may become the decade in which the Chinese state will no longer be able to manage the capitalist contradictions that have manifested domestically in the form of the housing crisis, rising government debt, or intensifying industrial overcapacity, and internationally in trade and geopolitical conflicts with the U.S. During the period of economic ascendancy, labor struggle was confined to gaining a larger share of the profit and did not assume an anti-state orientation, despite often protesting against the government for its failure to take responsibility. But when the economic demands of workers are compounded by other conflicts, the mass movements that emerge may expand their focus beyond economic gains. Without recognized organizations and leadership, however, the forms any mass movements may take are unpredictable. The end of an era throws off our old certainty, but it also forces us to reckon with the emergence of a new era and its new horizons of struggle.

Perhaps, a note of hope: In the ruins, a new layer of activists is beginning to emerge even under the most difficult of circumstances. The destruction of the activist groupings documented here and the infrastructures supporting them, including social groups and campus societies, have deprived young people of the space to learn how to organize. But a limited revival of activism was briefly seen in the early weeks of the pandemic. When the Chinese authorities were underprepared for the pandemic response, people were mostly left to their own to protect themselves and each other. The chaos presented an opportunity for people to organize out of necessity, but also of social solidarity to support one another. [20] This is when all sorts of mutual aid initiatives sprang up, some entirely spontaneous, while others drew from existing activists and their networks. Advocacy work temporarily resumed around labor rights, for instance, focusing on medical and sanitation workers who needed protective gear. There were also feminist activists who organized around domestic violence, which spiked during the early months of the lockdown in Wuhan and other areas in China, and LGBTQ activists who mobilized around the needs of LGBTQ people. Citizen journalists came to do their own reporting on what was happening, believing the authorities were not telling the truth.

Of course, the revival of social activism did not last very long, receding as the government cracked down on such efforts in the middle of 2020, and one should not exaggerate the extent and depth of this activist revival. Nevertheless, this was a crucial period for new activists to get a taste of activism, and for others to renew their commitment. [21]

Are we seeing a new cycle of labor struggle emerging? There have been some elements that may eventually constitute a new cycle. One somewhat surprising development is the still limited mobilization of white-collar workers, mostly centered on the tech industry which was booming but may now be busting. Even amid the repression of 2019, public discussion on labor was not completely muted. The anti-“996” mobilization by tech company employees in 2019 cracked open the reality of simmering discontent among young Chinese professional employees over the toxic work culture involving long working hours (from 9am to 9pm, 6 days a week), and then “involution” (内卷) came into the popular vocabulary to reflect the sense of not just overwork but also the disillusioned recognition that overwork leads only to personal stagnation. [22] More recently this evolved into what some observers have called China’s “anti-work” movement of “petting fish” (摸鱼) and “lying flat” (躺平). [23] All of these mark a rudimentary form of class consciousness, insofar as people have begun to recognize that their predicament transcends their individual experiences. Then, almost at the same time, we saw the explosion of public interest in delivery workers in 2020.

The shift to gig work in the service sector, precipitated by deindustrialization, structural employment changes and the venture capital investment in platform companies, has already resulted in some worker mobilization. Spontaneous networks of delivery drivers sprang up amid mounting problems and protest mobilization. Chen Guojiang, a former delivery worker-turned-advocate for workers’ rights known affectionately as Mengzhu (“head of the association”), emerged as a leader but without an organization behind him. Very confident and strategic, not unlike labor leaders of the previous generations, Mengzhu facilitated mutual aid, connected workers through online chat groups, and attracted attention through his online short videos hosted on popular Chinese sites. But occasionally, Mengzhu mobilized workers and led some coordinated actions to target the delivery platforms for their mistreatment of workers. This organizing work landed him in detention from February 2021 until January 2022. [24] This broadly fits the pattern of recent arrests of labor activists, especially the more and more preemptive nature of the repression. In the past, an activist would often be tolerated for years, provided they stayed within limits, before facing the possibility of detention under criminal charges. By contrast, it took no more than a couple of years of low-level organizing, in a manner not even immediately recognizable as “labor organizing” according to the models of the 2000s-2010s, before Mengzhu faced this fate. Drawn by the conditions and collective actions of delivery workers, some of the younger activists and student radicals still currently active have become interested in this sector, but space is limited for any meaningful participation. [25]

Looking forward to the next cycle of labor struggles, if and when it emerges, it seems likely that most members of the previous cycle’s two generations of labor activists may simply not be able to continue their work, whether due to giving up or being forced into inactivity. We need to look to the new generation of young workers in blue-, white- and pink-collar jobs who are trying to articulate their class experiences, and some of whom are learning to organize both in and outside of their workplaces. (And for many of them, such as delivery workers, their main workplace is the streets, while for others, such as office workers now working remotely under the pandemic, it is the home and cyberspace.) What they lack in terms of the civil society organizations and Marxist study groups also means that they are relieved of certain ideological burdens, compelled to experiment with new methods of organizing, and perhaps freer to articulate their own politics for the coming era.

Wen

P.S.

• Chuang | Apr 24, 2023 | Blog :

<https://chuangcn.org/2023/04/the-end-of-an-era-labor-activism-in-early-21st-century-china/>

Footnotes

[1] Discussions of labor activism in China and elsewhere often make two mistakes that this article avoids: they conflate workers' struggles with labor activism, and they conflate the early 21st century sense of "labor activism" with earlier forms of left intervention into workers' struggles. Late Qing and early Republican forms of worker self-organization emerged from guilds, secret societies, martial arts clubs, hometown associations, etc. When first anarchists and later Communists and others began organizing workers in the 1910s-1920s, they had to collaborate with these existing traditions to establish organizations more closely resembling the Western model of unions. (That Western model itself had also emerged from forms that were less centered on labor issues, and more organically connected to the lives of peasant-workers and early proletarians.) After 1949, certain unions were incorporated into the Chinese state under the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, while other types of worker organization were outlawed. When workers tried to fight for their interests against the state from the mid-1950s up through the restructuring of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s-2000s, they generally did so through informal networks, or in the late 1960s under the rubric of Cultural Revolution organizations. It was not until the late 1990s that a few migrant workers, labor lawyers, social workers, leftists and academics began cooperating to set up labor-support groups and eventually NGOs that became the main vehicle for what we now refer to as "labor activism." Of course, throughout this whole period from the beginning of China's industrialization to the present, whenever workers have fought collectively for their interests, their actions have often been initiated or coordinated by certain more militant coworkers, who may happen to have some more relevant experience than others. In the Republican period some of those militant workers would go on to join unions with ties to political parties, or form their own. That was not an option in the early 21st century due to a variety of historical conditions (not limited to political repression, which also existed in earlier times and other places that had independent unions). These conditions gave rise to the new categories of "labor activist" and "labor NGO," attracting a few militant workers (whose counterparts might have joined unions in the Republican era or red guards during the Cultural Revolution), alongside activists from more privileged backgrounds. These activist networks never grew to anything like the number or influence of those earlier organizations, but they became the main model for migrant labor support until conditions changed again in the late 2010s.

[2] See, for example *China on Strike: Narratives of Workers' Resistance*, edited by Hao Ren (Haymarket 2016), and *Striking to Survive: Workers' Resistance to Factory Relocations in China*, by Fan Shigang (Haymarket 2018).

[3] See "[The Awakening of Lin Xiaocao A Personal Account of the 2010 Strike at Nanhai Honda](#)" (including translators' preface on the strike's often misunderstood significance, and the sources cited in footnotes) in *Chuang #2: Frontiers* (2019).

[4] Just the year before, *Time* magazine had chosen "The Chinese Worker" as one of its Persons of

the Year.

[5] Not only was the workers' movement historically specific, many of today's leftists in China and elsewhere who take it as a model have fundamentally misunderstood how the movement took shape and played out. See "[A History of Separation](#)" from *Endnotes* #4 and *Old Gods, New Enigmas* by Mike Davis.

[6] Chuang may have been one of the only groups arguing that it was structurally impossible for anything closely resembling the classical workers' movement to emerge in China, or anywhere else, after the secular trend toward global deindustrialization had begun to play out by the 1990s (among other historical changes), with even booming China's industrial employment entering its final [decline around 2013](#). When "[No Way Forward, No Way Back](#)" made this argument in 2015, fleshing out what *Endnotes* had already suggested in "[Misery and Debt](#)" (2010), it was highly controversial, but by the time "[Picking Quarrels](#)" added empirical weight to an updated elaboration of the same argument in 2019 (for *Chuang* #2), this trend and its effects on the nature of proletarian struggles—and the limits it imposed on labor organizing that took the classical workers' movement as its model—had already become clear for all to see.

[7] A complete history of China's migrant worker struggles and related labor activism still needs to be written. Here I am attempting no more than an impressionistic generalization of these groups and their defining characteristics.

[8] See translations and analysis on the Chuang blog: "[Let the People Themselves Decide Whether We're Guilty](#)" (June 2018), "[Locked Up for Reading Books: Voices from the November 15th Incident](#)" (January 2018), and "[The Mastermind: A Third Young Leftist Speaks Out on the November 15th Incident](#)" (January 2018).

[9] For a general overview of the Jasic Affair, followed by a collection of more detailed sources in English and Chinese, see "[Critical Perspectives on the Jasic Movement – Suitable tactics of intervention?](#)" (Nao Qingchu, 2020). One more recent analysis worth highlighting is "[Leninists in a Chinese Factory: Reflections on the Jasic Labour Organising Strategy](#)" (Zhang Yueran, *Made in China*, 2020).

[10] Parry Leung, *Labor Activists and the New Working Class in China*, 2015, pp.161-2

[11] By contrast, *en masse* detention and police violence was more common in the suppression of state-sector worker protests in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This was probably because those protests were usually larger scale and more clearly organized than most migrant struggles at the time.

[12] See "[Free the Women's Day Five! Statements from Chinese workers & students](#)" (March 2015), "[Gender War & Social Stability in Xi's China: Interview with a Friend of the Women's Day Five](#)" (March 2015), and "[Women's Day & the Feminist Five a year on](#)" (March 2016), all on the Chuang blog, and *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* by Leta Hong Fincher (2018).

[13] See "[The Guangdong Six and the rule of law \(of value\): Theses on the December 3 crackdown](#)" (December 2015, Chuang blog), and "[Making Sense of the 2015 Crackdown on Labor NGOs in China](#)" (July 2017, Shannon Lee blog).

[14] See *Striking to Survive: Workers' Resistance to Factory Relocations in China* by Fan Shigang

(Haymarket, 2018)

[15] [“Another shoe strike in the Pearl River Delta: Lide, Guangzhou”](#) (Nao blog, 2014) and [“Lide shoe workers beaten and arrested during assembly in Guangzhou”](#) (Chuang blog, 2015).

[16] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/31/activists-investigating-ivanka-trumps-china-shoe-factory-detained-or-missing> >Activists investigating Ivanka Trump’s China shoe factory detained or missing” (Guardian, 2017).

[17] <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2018/05/17/beijing-evictions-a-winters-tale/> >Beijing Evictions, a Winter’s Tale” (Made in China, 2018); [“Adding Insult to Injury: Beijing’s Evictions and the Discourse of ‘Low-End Population’”](#) (Chuang blog 2018).

[18] Editorial note: It’s often forgotten that rural-to-urban migrants not only formed a significant lower stratum of the industrial workforce in the socialist era, but also staged major struggles that arguably influenced the course of history at key moments such as 1967. See [Chinese Workers: A New History](#) by Jackie Sheehan (Routledge 1998), and [The Communist Road to Capitalism](#) by Ralf Ruckus (PM Press 2021).

[19] For example, see the discussion of China’s 1990s deindustrialization, 2000s reindustrialization, and 2010s deindustrialization in relation to global trends and Marx’s “general law of capitalist accumulation” in *Automation and the Future of Work* by Aaron Benanav (Verso 2020), pages 22-23.

[20] This courageous and inspiring self-organization is explored in Chuang’s latest book: [Social Contagion and Other Material on Microbiological Class War in China](#) (Charles H. Kerr, 2021)

[21] *Editorial note:* As this article was being revised for publication in 2022, a series of struggles related to Zero-COVID measures emerged throughout China, most spontaneous but some involving various types of activism organized by both seasoned and new activists. Some of those struggles were staffed by workers fighting in their workplaces against “closed loop” measures as well as pay issues, and after the abrupt end of Zero-COVID in December, layoffs resulting from closure of pandemic supply plants. Other proletarian struggles of that year took place in the sphere of reproduction, fighting the effects of Zero-COVID measures on commuting, education, access to housing, food and medicine, etc. To our knowledge, all of these were basically spontaneous, but it is also possible that some participants developed skills and ideas through their involvement that will be carried over into future mobilizations. We hope to examine the 2022 cycle of struggles more comprehensively in future writings, but meanwhile see our blog posts [“Struggling to Survive in Shanghai and Beyond”](#); [“White Terror, Attacks on Women, Bank Protests, Falling Wages”](#); [“Three Autumn Revolts”](#); and [“Beyond the White Paper: An Interview on the Social Elite in Shanghai’s Protests of November 2022.”](#)

[22] Both 996 and involution are explored in [“Involution: Wildcat on China’s 2020”](#) (Chuang blog, 2021).

[23] See, for example, [“Lying Flat: Profiling the Tangping Attitude”](#) (Made in China, January 2023), [“Disarticulating Qingnian”](#) (Made in China, March 2022), [“The Tangpingist Manifesto”](#) (Agora, 2021), and [“Why Chinese youngsters are embracing a philosophy of “slacking-off”](#)” (Quartz, 2020).

[24] On Mengzhu’s organizing activities and arrest, see [“Leader of Delivery Riders Alliance](#)

[Detained, Solidarity Movement Repressed](#)” (Labor Notes, April 2021) and “[Free Mengzhu! An interview with Free Chen Guojiang](#)” (Asia Art Tours, May 2021). Like many of the activists detained since 2018, there has been little word of Mengzhu since his release (as far as we know, just an ambiguous [video](#) on his WeChat channel)—probably due to a gag order.

[25] Some of this interest was stimulated by an in-depth report on delivery workers’ conditions published in the popular magazine *Renwu* in 2020. For a translation, along with a preface on some delivery worker struggles from that year, see: “[Delivery Workers, Trapped in the System](#)” (Chuang blog, 2020).