

Unions *need* to talk

THE US apparel industry has outsourced work for more than four decades, but soon there will be a dramatic acceleration of this trend. On 1 January 2005, the worldwide textile trade agreement known as the Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA) will terminate, ending 30 years of restriction of imports through quotas. Researchers predict that manufacturers will close factories in dozens of countries in Latin America and Southeast Asia and will shift apparel production to countries where profits can be maximised – especially China. In Los Angeles alone, of the 90,000 Latina immigrants currently employed, upwards of 50,000 will likely lose their jobs within the next few years. Millions of workers in Bangladesh, Indonesia and Mexico have made urgent appeals to address the devastating consequences of this new free trade environment.

While garment unions will be fighting to retain jobs in many countries, they will also need to seek long-range solutions to worker empowerment. It makes sense that whereas multinational corporations have global sourcing strategies, workers should have countervailing international labour strategies. Just as unions developed coordinated organising and bargaining activities for different locations within the US, so now should they follow the work overseas and unite workers across borders, particularly vis a vis common employers. Only then can they hope to regain the leverage that was lost when corporations outsourced to foreign shores.

Trade unions in China

To be sure, there are big problems with Chinese unions. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) is the official union in China, and is the only organisation that can legally give sanction to unions that form at the grassroots level. This means that workers who have concerns about the ACFTU cannot form independent unions, but must work within the existing union structure for change. In practice, this has meant that public dissidence is not tolerated, and worker organisers have been jailed without due process for criticising government and union officials.

Another problem is that the ACFTU has not been effective in organising in China's changing economy. Unions had, and continue to have, high density in government-owned manufacturing and services. However as the economy has shifted to private ownership, unions have maintained collective agreements in some large private and foreign-owned enterprises, but these are few. In the special economic zones employing millions of migrant workers where sweatshop exploitation is rampant, unions are virtually non-existent.

Even more troubling is the ACFTU's inability to lead workers struggles. Although Chinese laws make it hard to organise, in fact millions of workers engage in wage disputes every year. The first months of 2004 saw a wave of strikes throughout Guangzhou province. In almost every case, the

union neither represents the workers in their lawsuits nor their strikes.

The need for engagement

If we begin to engage with Chinese unions, we are certain to find opportunities to share experiences and be helpful. In researching labour issues in China, I have found that worker organisers and union leaders alike are eager to learn from foreign experience. While interviewing a young man who had participated in a strike in Guangzhou involving 8,000 workers at his sheet metal factory, I suggested that the gains he and his co-workers had made as a result of the strike would be more far-reaching if the agreements could be institutionalised in a collective bargaining agreement. This gave him pause for thought, because while his experience with trade unions was not very good, it was indeed a possibility that unions could play a positive role in securing workers rights.

Some ACFTU officials can only say what they have said for decades, but others are struggling with the tremendous gap between what the union is and what the workers need. They recognise that the ACFTU must change in order to be relevant, and they are struggling to find new ways to organise and establish collective bargaining relationships. It would be really helpful for these union staffers to have more models to learn from.

It is time that garment workers who are losing work due to the MFA meet Chinese garment workers who are gaining work. This inevitably breaks down barriers and demystifies the other side through humanising it, leading to commitment on both sides to work in solidarity.

The next step would be to learn more about each other. So little is known by the non-Chinese world about China, especially about labour. Those who read Chinese have access to a wealth of research, literature, and journalism about labour issues that is not available in other languages. Organisations like universities and media organisations have an especially important role to play.

Finally, unions need to begin to talk with each other. The challenge will be to base these relationships upon a firm commitment to democracy and respect for human rights while at the same time respecting and reaffirming the right of national labour movements to have varying models, styles, and practices.

In January 2004 in southern China I saw an enormous distribution centre at the port of Zhuhai in Guangzhou province. I was told that this was where all WalMart products manufactured in China were received, and then shipped to ports all over the world. "This is the jugular of the global economy", I thought, "If we could only organise this place we could control the global economy."

Worker organisers and union leaders alike are eager to learn from foreign experience

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