

Socialist Internationalism and the Chinese Working Class

written by Ruo Yan, Andrew Sebald | August 6, 2024



In January 2014, Xu Lizhi penned “A Screw Fell to the Ground,” (一颗螺丝掉在地上), one poem in a collection he wrote during his soul-crushing experience as a Foxconn worker:

A screw fell to the ground
In this dark night of overtime
Plunging vertically, lightly clinking
It won't attract anyone's attention
Just like last time
On a night like this
When someone plunged to the ground.¹

The poem is just one of several glimpses into the harrowing conditions of Foxconn workers in China. The circumstances were so oppressive that various workers committed suicide, believing it was their last hope for escape. Xu Lizhi himself committed suicide in October of the same year.

Xu's tragic death ironically came at the height of China's world-historic economic rise. Wage growth in China remained constant from 2007 to 2013, even as countries around the world suffered from the 2008 economic crisis. Even the rate of wage inequality, which had been rapidly increasing for decades, began to decline in the immediate years following 2008.² For some left-wing researchers and activists, China's model of development offers the beginnings of an alternative to Western imperialism and capitalism, a bulwark of the global South. The Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, for example, touts the Chinese regime for “combining an ‘industrious revolution’ that is based on a social division of labor and small-scale decentralization with strategic socialist planning.”³ Debates about China's economic model continue to rage on the socialist left, sharpened in recent years by the rising tensions between the United States and China. However, the experiences of Chinese workers like Xu are rarely centered in these discussions. Seldom is the connection made between the Chinese working class and its position in the present global economy, where China's communist past stands in contradiction to the struggles that the Chinese working class faces on a daily basis. Even on the rare occasions in which working-class voices and organizations are heard, there is little sense of how reforms are often carried out only after the repression, demobilization, or co-optation of independent workers' organizing.⁴

The silencing of the Chinese working class was no sudden disaster, but an escalation of bureaucratic

suppression of independent working-class organization over decades. Shortly after Deng Xiaoping established four Special Economic Zones in the eastern coastal regions, workers' right to strike was removed from the state constitution in 1982. The ferocious crackdown on Tiananmen Square in May and June of 1989 crushed the last great uprising of Chinese workers, whose demands against the adverse effects of market reforms far exceeded the student protesters' liberal vision. Deng Xiaoping's policy decisions conveyed that China would no longer aim to challenge Washington's imperial liberal order; rather, it would aim to adapt to it and profit from it. Just as workers had been at the center of the resistance for freedom, so they were shoved into the crux of the burden of capital.⁵ China's turn to U.S. capital was only enabled by the crushing of Chinese workers' mass mobilization in 1989. By the end of the following year, Huang Wenjun, then commercial minister at the Chinese Embassy in the United States, boasted to the *Los Angeles Times* that "the pace of U.S. investment [in China] has actually accelerated since June," and that "the prospects for U.S. investment in China are very bright."⁶

The party bureaucracy and affiliated elite firms and actors continue to be enriched by constraining the collective power of Chinese workers. While neoliberalism may not have razed China's economy as it did in Russia and other parts of the global South, it ravaged the agency of the Chinese working class in order to meet global demand, saving capitalism when it faced a crisis of profitability at the time it forced vast de-industrialization across Latin America. Political labor organizing in China abruptly halted in the 1990s with the fall of the China Free Labor Union (中国自由工会) in the wake of growing authoritarianism. The assurances of the "iron rice bowl" (铁饭碗) from Mao's era—stable job security for life and other benefits—were robbed from the Chinese workers, while State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) withheld menial payment from their furious employees. Workers organized while gaining little success, if any. Labor NGOs emerged as ersatz centers for worker advocacy in the brief period of liberalization, but they would meet fateful ends with the rise of President Xi Jinping's administration. The brutal suppression of the JASIC strike in 2018, and the everyday violence that labor organizers like Meng Han faced marked the logical end of the journey the Chinese ruling class had embarked on since the 1980s: the Chinese economy was catapulted into greatness on the bleeding backs of its once-heralded workers.

This special section presents the texts of five talks on Chinese labor, revised for publication. The series of talks had two key aims: 1) to equip socialists, radical students and workers, the Sinophone diaspora, and other fellow travelers with a basic understanding of the state of the Chinese working class; and 2) to encourage different organizations to develop concrete forms of international solidarity with Chinese workers—grounded on the principle of working-class political independence. The current terrain of internationalism unfortunately is dominated by forces antagonistic to the Chinese working class. Opposition to the Chinese regime is largely led by warmongering liberals (backed by some diaspora and human rights NGOs) eager to stoke Sinophobia and Great Power rivalry to preserve U.S. imperialism. On the other hand, though not at the helm of the imperialist system, the Chinese regime and its proxies are the most direct force of persecution of Chinese workers, keen on surveilling, targeting, and neutralizing any opposition at home and abroad. Worse yet, there is little space for trustworthy outlets to learn about the basic conditions of Chinese workers and labor organizers, independent of state-sponsored media, whether *China Daily* or Radio Free Asia. And so, the international left's basic understanding of the state of the Chinese working class is still far too impoverished. Especially since the heightened repression of the mid-2010s, very few, if any, on-the-ground activists and organizations can safely offer critical analysis of labor conditions in public without threats to personal safety from the state. Because of this, most of the authors of these talks—ranging from long-time Chinese labor organizers forced into exile to overseas Chinese feminists—live abroad and write under pseudonyms. All publicly hosting and endorsing organizations were based outside of China.

“The State of Labor Resistance and Repression in China” and “Gender and the Chinese Working Class” provide a basic overview of what everyday Chinese workers and labor organizers have faced in recent years. These talks index past and ongoing broad changes in the Chinese working class, different modes of organizing, and how they have adapted over the years to shifting economic conditions and modalities of state repression. The next two talks have a more specific focus, featuring examples of sites ripe for developing practical campaigns. The aim is to be as concrete as possible about the avenues for international solidarity. Inspired by Zhengzhou’s Foxconn workers’ mass protests and overseas Chinese activists’ global solidarity campaign in late 2022, “Labor Solidarity Through Supply Chains” unpacks the links between Foxconn and U.S. tech giants like Apple. The talk concludes with some suggestions for how unions in the United States, like the Apple Retail Union and the United Auto Workers, can show solidarity with Chinese workers by pressuring sites of collaboration between U.S. and Chinese capital abroad. “Between Chinese Surveillance and Israeli Settler-Colonialism” centers on the ongoing genocide in Palestine, which features an emergent network of Sinophone activists across different continents raising awareness of how Chinese surveillance firms, like Hikvision, play a role in assisting U.S.-backed Israeli settler-colonialism. Such technologies, as the talk shows, intertwine with Western forms of policing to discipline and surveil communities beyond Israel, from Uyghur workers in Xinjiang to Black and Brown communities in New York. Last but not least, “History of U.S.-China Labor Solidarity” brings together three veteran labor activists in the United States to share their experiences organizing solidarity work in recent decades, reflecting on past lessons relevant to rebuilding international solidarity in the future.

We designed this set of talks to help build the international socialist movement, but we do not seek to advance one particular organization or ideological tradition. We are members of a caucus in DSA, Bread and Roses, and another socialist organization, the Tempest Collective, who—with the help of other individual DSA members and overseas Chinese activists—organized these talks. We also thank our endorsers, Haymarket Books, *New Bloom Magazine*, Students 4 Hong Kong, Justice is Global, and *Asian Labour Review*. We hope this network of organizations, building across differences and constituencies, models the approach needed to meaningfully rebuild solidarity with the Chinese working class. Just as the socialist left must rediscover its identity anew from the successes and failures of the 20th century, a global solidarity movement with the Chinese working class must be reinvented by gathering diverse militants, unions, and socialist organizations together in collective thinking and struggle. A united front of working-class and socialist organizations, left-wing and labor media outlets, and diaspora collectives would be the mirror image of the internationalism of the U.S.-China ruling class, which jointly maintains the capitalist system, even in the face of geopolitical rivalry.

Few avenues remain for the political self-organization of the working class in China, which makes an enlarged role for diaspora and socialist organizations abroad necessary. Because of the state of repression and co-optation, it is difficult to consolidate any movement gains in China despite the constant flashes of militancy: survivor-led feminist struggles against powerful abusers since #MeToo, the returning wave of wildcat strikes, and the short-lived but explosive White Paper movement. However, there is more space to do so among overseas Sinophone communities, which often overlap with struggles back home: the extension of feminist advocacy for survivors within dissident spaces, the global solidarity campaigns around Sitong Bridge and the White Paper movement, and the emergent self-organization of rank-and-file Chinese international workers in higher education labor struggles. Many young overseas activists directly participate in and learn from the struggles of other communities abroad, like the recent upsurges for Black and Palestinian liberation. Thanks to social media and the fluidity of migrant communities, these movement gains can be deepened, shared, and circulated across borders. The responsibility of internationalists abroad is to hold space and provide resources for this exchange.

We hope this series equips readers with the tools to begin this work. Ultimately, working-class internationalism can only be forged in practice beyond these pages. In the face of imperialists of all stripes taking advantage of American and Chinese workers in this deepening new Cold War, the left must provide a political alternative—the struggle demands it.

Notes

1. English translations of Xu Lizhi's poetry can be found [here](#).
2. Björn Gustafsson and Haiyuan Wan, "Wage growth and inequality in urban China: 1988-2013," *China Economic Review* 62 (2020): 2.
3. "Looking Towards China: Multipolarity as an Opportunity for the Latin American People," *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*, April 11, 2022.
4. Labor researcher Manfred Elfstrom observes that Chinese government authorities "experiment with novel, somewhat pro-worker policies, while coming down harshly on labor organizers and ordinary striking workers alike." Manfred Elfstrom, "Workers and Change in China," interview by Ivan Franceschini, *Made in China Journal*, Jan. 18, 2021. For a discussion of how local government authorities have co-opted and suppressed independent mutual aid efforts during the early days of the pandemic in Wuhan, see Chuang, *Social Contagion* (Charles H. Kerr Publishing Co, 2021).
5. Yueran Zhang, "The Forgotten Socialists of Tiananmen Square," *Jacobin*, June 4, 2019.
6. George White, "U.S. Firms Lift Taboo on Doing Business in Beijing," *The Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 1, 1990.
7. Rong Xiaoqing, "How #MeToo Divided NYC's Chinese Democracy Movement," *The Nation*, May 24, 2024. Liu Xiang and Ruo Yan, "After Workers Flee China's Largest iPhone Factory, Activists Demand Accountability from Apple," *Labor Notes*, November 10, 2022. Noturlilpink, "Observations and Reflections on Sitong-Bridge-Banners-Inspired Poster Campaign: 'Courage emerges from practice, and trust is also grown from connection and collective actions'," *Medium*, Nov. 1, 2022.

This Article is part of a special section on labor in China:

- Socialist Internationalism and the Chinese Working Class: An Introduction, Ruo Yan and Andrew Sebald
- The State of Labor Resistance and Repression in China, Julie Liu and Roy Li
- Gender and the Chinese Working Class, Zoe Zhao and Olia Shu
- Labor Solidarity Through Supply Chains: Foxconn and the U.S. Labor Movement, Zhang Mazi
- Between Chinese Surveillance and Israeli Settler Colonialism, Palestine Solidarity Action Network
- Activists on U.S.-China Labor Solidarity, Ellen David Friedman, Alex T. Tom, and Kevin Lin, moderated by Andrew Sebald