

China: Labor unrest and role of unions

Wednesday 23 June 2010, by [CHAN Anita](#) (Date first published: 18 June 2010).

The ACFTU has a herculean task ahead if it wants to fulfill its assigned role of representing workers or, if it falls short of this mission, to at least be able to maintain social stability. To do away with the “fake unions”, the local trade union offices should be put under the jurisdiction of the upper-level union instead of local governments. The ACFTU should allow workers to elect their representatives to their workplace union committees, too, as has happened in a very modest number of firms. Only then can the union branches demonstrably represent workers’ interests rather than the employers’ or governments’.

Foreign investors will not easily give up the low-wage, longer-than-normal-working-hours policy they have been practising in China. The ACFTU has had in place for many years a policy of urging workplace unions to sign collective contracts with the managements. But the unions in China do not have much experience in dealing with capital and management. This shortcoming was recognized by an editorial in the *People’s Daily* on June 9.

Therefore, the ACFTU would do well to open up and exchange experiences with unions in other countries. Though this trend has already begun, the process has to be expedited if Chinese unions are to learn how to conduct collective bargaining effectively. To ensure success, the ACFTU will have to join hands with global unions as capital plays off countries against each other.

Fortunately, China’s labor laws are favorable to workers. Moreover, the workers are willing to become members of the ACFTU - the Honda workers who went on strike now want to hold a new election to their union branch committee.

This demand should not be confused with workers seeking an alternative union, a point that is often misunderstood by foreign observers. The right to have a democratic re-election is within the purview of China’s Trade Union Law. The ACFTU will win the trust of Chinese workers by supporting such elections, which would help place labor relations on a legitimate, constructive footing. A union committee recognized by workers as their own is a pre-condition to successful collective bargaining.

By Anita Chan (China Daily)

P.S.

* China Daily 06/18/2010 page 9.

* The author is a research professor at the China Research Centre, University of Technology, Sydney.