

The Nanhai Honda strike and the union

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One of the most interesting dimensions of the recent strikes at three Honda auto components factories in the Pearl River Delta region has been workers' clearly articulated demand for their enterprise unions to be elected by and accountable to workers. Their demands are uncommon, but not unprecedented. Back in 2006, workers at the Ole Wolff electronics factory fought for a workers' elected union in Yantai. (1) Another distinguishing factor in these disputes was the large wage increases demanded by workers. In most industrial action in the Pearl River Delta region, workers demand little or no more than the minimum wage, or payment of unpaid wages. But striking workers at these Honda plants demanded large wage increases, and what's more, they also wanted a graduated wage scale, which reflected their aspirations for a career path and job security.

To better understand these strikes, this issue of CLNT will focus in detail on the events that unfolded at the site of the first Honda strike at Nanhai Honda in Foshan. We have translated four documents that give very detailed accounts of how some workers organized themselves to strike, convinced others to join them, how they negotiated, and the role played by trade union leadership at various levels. In two of these articles, journalists convey through interviews with Honda workers, how, as the strike continued, the strikers developed higher consciousness of the importance of setting up a democratic union organization in their factory.

Introduction to the Nanhai Honda strike

A lot has been already written in English about the basic details of the strike. In summary, the strike at the Honda transmission manufacturer in Nanhai began on 17 May 2010, and continued until 1 June - unusually long compared to recent strikes anywhere in China. Workers were striking for a large pay increase, better conditions for student interns who made up 1/3 of the workforce and, eventually, for democratic elections for union representatives at the factory. The strike ended in a definite win for the workers, who got a 24 percent pay rise and a promise of democratic union elections (more details in the translated articles).

The workers' success at Nanhai has inspired strikes at two more Honda factories, and both ended in substantial wage increases - one at a factory making exhaust pipes for Honda in Foshan, and the other at a factory making locks and mirrors in Zhongshan. Since then, strikes have also occurred at factories supplying other auto companies, including Toyota. The latest news is that on 14 July workers went on strike at another Honda supplier in Foshan city, Atsumitec Co, demanding a 60 percent wage increase from 900 RMB to 1,540 RMB a month according to Reuters. (2)

Workers' organization and the role of the union

The first two translated articles in this edition of CLNT were published in China News Weekly, a mainstream weekly news magazine in mainland China.

The first article describes how the strike was initiated by two young male workers, who had already handed in their resignation notices to the factory because of the low wages, but had to wait for another month before they could leave. While waiting they decided first to "do something for (their) fellow workers". Both were fired five days into the strike, as the article explains. The article then

reports in detail how negotiations proceeded, and how the trade union responded. It contains particularly interesting information on the condition of the many student interns working at Honda, and the pressure put on them by their schools and the local government to return to work.

[Avid Young Reader of Mao Zedong's Poetry from the post-1980s generation leads the Honda strike](#)

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The second article, also from China News Weekly, was written by a journalist with intimate knowledge of the events that unfolded in the factory. The article is long, but has a lot of detail about how the negotiations developed, how new union delegates were elected during the dispute, how dysfunctional the enterprise union was, and how people sent from the township and district-level unions gathered at the factory in large numbers and a physical altercation broke out as they tried to force workers to return to the job. The article also has an interesting account of an unheard of, supposedly self-organized employees association within the factory, called the "Vanguard League." But for all intents and purposes it is definitely an organization backed by management as it openly has the authority to get workers who join the League to be promoted to be on the management staff. In many ways it also functions very much like the Communist Youth League during the Maoist era. The difference, of course, is that in those yesteryears the Youth League was a stepping stone to get recruited into the Chinese Communist Party, whereas at Nanhai Honda it serves the interests of management. The fact the "Vanguard League" is such a well established pro-management organization may mean that it will run company-backed candidates in the up-coming union elections in the factory.

[China's Union Facing Reorganization because of Labor Disputes: some regions trial elections](#)

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The third article is an apology, of sorts, issued by the Nanhai District Union and the Shishan township union, after groups of union officials created a public relations disaster by trying to violently break the strike and force workers back on the job (the letter is referenced in the second China News Weekly article). Workers were not satisfied with the union's self-justification laid out in the letter. An open letter was also written by Nanhai Honda worker representatives in response to the incident, and is available here in English:

<http://libcom.org/news/open-letter-public-all-workers-honda-auto-parts-manufacturing-co-ltd-04062010>

[Open Letter from Nanhai District Trade Union and Shishan Township Union to Honda workers](#)

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The final translation is very brief, but conveys the seriousness with which higher levels of the union are treating the strikes at Honda. The Guangdong Federation of Trade Unions, under the leadership of the relatively progressive chairperson Kong Xianghong, has declared that the Honda Nanhai factory will be a pilot site for new democratic accountability mechanisms, including an annual vote of confidence in a democratically elected union chair. Our sources inform us that Kong in these few weeks has been making preparations for a democratic election at the plant, but we do not have any further information. Given workers elevated consciousness after the strike, and the possibility that the management-backed Vanguard League will put forward candidates with company support, a genuinely contested trade union election may well be in store.

[Plans for election of union chair at Nanhai Honda](#)

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(1) <http://www.clntranslations.org/article/37/ole-woff-2>

(2) <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE66E12C20100715>

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<http://www.clntranslations.org/article/56/honda>