

Women workers in the “Chinese Century”

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*“A blossom rose,
Before it could enjoy the warmth of the sun,
Before it could feel the touch of a breeze,
Was mercilessly broken off from its branch,
Got mixed with mud in the ground, shattered.
Its sweet scent was still in the air,
Its color still red.
Maybe some affectionate young man,
Once wished to offer this rose to his beloved bride?”*

This is a poem written by a male worker to mourn the death of two women workers who undertook treatment in the same hospital where he was staying. They were both 18 and worked in different factories in the EPZ of the Pearl River Delta in southern China, and both were victims of chemical poisoning. One jumped out of the balcony of a hospital and killed herself on 2nd November 2003. The main cause were her factory refused to pay compensation and she could hardly find another job to support her family because of the illness. Another one died of benzene poisoning on 3rd November, after 11-month hospitalization. Since the factory concerned stopped paying money to the hospital for the treatment of this woman worker, the hospital stopped providing sufficient medication to her and she eventually died.

The tragic death of these two young women is only a tip of the ice berth of the plight of Chinese women workers in 20 years of ‘economic reform’ and ‘modernization’.

Profound transformation of the working class

Over the past 10 years, the active urban working population in Mainland China has grown to 200 million, but its composition has changed greatly. The large-scale privatization resulted from

economic restructuring have dealt a big blow to the old working class. The number of workers in state owned enterprises (SOEs) shrank from 190 million in 1995 to 83 million in 2000. The number of workers in collective enterprises has halved since 1995, or a net decrease of 14 million. Gone are the secured and well-paid jobs of the SOEs. Women workers in SOEs are the first victims of such transformation. They have been the first to get fired in the late eighties, who were told by the government that in this age of modernization their duty are to return to their home. Since then women workers over 40 have been more and more difficult to keep their job. The official unemployment figure is 3.1 %, or 5.6 million, but a more realistic appreciation may range from between 10 to 15 %, or 18 to 30 million workers. Some sources even put the figure as high as 40 million. Among the ranks of unemployed, many of them are women.

At the same time, more than 100 million migrant workers from the rural area have roamed the country in the search of jobs. A new working class has been formed along with the old, and many of them are women. Under the one party state, working people are denied the basic right of association, therefore they are totally defenseless when super exploited. In addition to this, they are less educated and less skill than urban workers, thus their market value is considered to be substantially lower. All these factors make the wages of these migrant workers so cheap that it attracts huge number of Foreign Direct Investment.

There are some 800 EPZs all over the world, employing approximately 30 million workers. The Chinese EPZs employs approximately 20 million of them which accounts for two third of the world total. The Chinese figure speaks for the fact that China has become favorite heaven for TNCs' Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). FDI flows to countries where wages are exceedingly low, which implies high profit rate. Chinese wages is very low, even lower than India, although China's GDP per capita is one time higher than India. China was awarded the title of 'world factory' for its huge export. The title should read: 'the world sweatshops'.

Working conditions in the EPZ

Back in 1995 the Chinese government has adopted the first labor code, offering protection on wages, working hours, employment regulations and holidays etc. Yet it is rare to find that the code has been enforced. In most of the occasions, the labor departments simply turn a deaf ear to workers complaints, sometimes even goes so far as to hard press workers to give up their rightful claims. This greatly helps the TNCs and their sub-contractors to unscrupulously exploit workers, especially women workers, who make up the absolute majority of working population in EPZs.

The author once encountered a male worker who was looking for job in the EPZ of Shenzhen. He complained that it was too difficult to find a job, since plants in the EPZ always prefer female to male workers. As to my question 'why is this?' he replied, 'female workers are more easy to handle with'. For management, 'handling' male workers are more difficult, because they are less likely to endure the cruelty of sweatshops. Cases of violent fighting between male workers and the management were reported from time to time. As for women workers, since they mainly come from rural area where women has been oppressed for thousand years and therefore tends to be more obedient, they tend to be more tolerant even when unscrupulously exploited. In addition to tradition, the fact that they have little access to legal advice, have little knowledge of their own rights etc; make them easy preys of irresponsible management.

In EPZs the daily working hours is as much as 10-12. In times of rushing through orders, workers working from 8am to 10pm are common, and in some cases they may work until 2am. Many of them only have one day off or even none per month. That is much longer then the legal maximum working

hours of 40 hours per week. Workers find it hard to cope with such hard labor, but refusing to work over time will result in firing. Only youngsters in their late teen and early twenties could endure such inhumane hardship. When they reach their late twenties they will find it hard to continue, and it is the time they have to leave on their own account, thus releasing the management the burden of paying any compensation if the latter fire them.

In EPZs women population far exceeds those of male, making women workers difficult to find a date. Even if one finds it, one's family will oppose her choice if the man does not come from the same county. Moreover, some factories have rules that force women workers to resign if they get married. It is common for married couples who come to the same EPZ to live separately, each staying in their own factory's dormitory. Even when the couple work in the same factory, they still have to live in separate dormitories, thus no normal sex life is possible. If women workers get pregnant, the only choice is resignation, because they simply could not do such hard work. The employers then need not pay any maternity leave, although they are liable to pay according to the law. In a word, women workers are seen as simple tools for the process of 'value-added', not as human.

In Shenzhen, the minimum wages is 480 RMB for the outer EPZ and 610 RMB for the inner EPZ in 2004 - 05. These are shamefully low wages. Yet majority workers do not even get this level of wages. Some may get as low as 300 RMB, which is not even enough for food.

Many women workers overwork at the expense of their health. In addition to this there are many more obstacle for workers to maintain their health: the management's harsh policy of no sick leave, restriction on using toilets, and high medical expenses charged by both private and public hospitals etc. Thus women workers suffer from bad health. Most of them suffer from menstruation pain. One third of them are skinny. Many have nearsightedness, especially those who work in electronics plants. Much severe problem is occupational accidents and exposure to toxics. Apart from body health, women workers suffer from spiritual damages for having to separate from their families, few support group in the cities, sexual harassment etc. But being denied the basic civil rights and labor rights, they are robbed of the right to self-defense.

China is probably one of the most repressive states towards labor. Not only does her deny workers the right to organize, her labor department and official trade unions are so anti-labor that they often refuse to enforce existing laws when these laws are favorable to workers. Another means to control migrant labor is the Hu-Kou system, or household registration, which restrict the right of mobility across the country, particularly restricting the right of rural residents moving into cities. Migrant workers had to pay several hundred RMB in order to get a 'temporary residential card'. Failure to produce the card would result in forceful and always violent repatriation to one's home village. After a migrant college graduate who moved to another city to work was beaten to death for failing to produce the card in 2003, uproar swept across the country, and in response to this the new administration somehow relaxed the Hu-Kou system. The fee for the card was also substantially lowered. Still the basic principle of denying equal citizenship to rural residents is in place, and as such the migrant workers are still denied basic welfare, and their children denied education.

Then why then rural young women still flock to the cities to look for job? It is because the rural is slipping towards bankruptcy. The 'scissors' (price differential between agricultural products and industrial products) has been widening year after year, bringing enormous burden to small farmers. In addition to this is higher and higher taxes. It leaves farmers with little cash in their disposal. Having difficulties to pay school fees for their younger children, especially when they are boys, or to pay taxes, or to pay for industrial products, their parents have to send their elder daughters to cities for work. Moreover, young women with basic or secondary education also prefer moving to cities to find work. They see this as a chance for improving the lives of their families and for personal development. They like to say that sticking to farming is 'having their chest facing the soil and their

back facing the sky day after day, year after year', implying that there is little room for personal development for remaining in the field. Hence millions of them migrate to look for jobs.

The Gold Peak Case: OSH in Chinese EPZ

Lately, on the 14th of February, 2005, a coalmine explosion killed more than 200 mine workers. It is but one of the cases of industrial accidents. According to the State Administration of Work Safety, the year 2003 had 136,000 victims of industrial accidents, and migrant workers accounted for over 80%; in the same year there are 500,000 victims of occupational diseases, and migrant workers accounted for more than a half. Again, many of them are women.

Had workers enjoyed the right to association and freedom of speech, and the right to get proper OSH training and necessary protection, the problem may not be that serious. Being denied such basic rights implies that they are being bound from hands to feet from protecting themselves even when they work in the unsafe working conditions. And when workers tried to voice out their grievances, they are being threatened with retaliation.

The poisoning case of the GP batteries is another outrages example of how women workers health being sacrificed by local officials and investors.

Gold Peak Industrial Group is a Hong Kong based TNC and its subsidiary GP Batteries has more than a dozen factories in China, with 2 located in Huizhou, Guangdong. The overwhelming majority of the workforce is women. The factory provides little protection for workers who have to process cadmium day in and day out, and pregnant women workers were ordered to work in these condition as well. At the end of 2003, after long time sickness, some workers went to hospital to get medical test and found that they have abnormally high level of cadmium in their body. Cadmium is a chemical used in producing batteries, and high-level cadmium in the body will cause cancer and serious bone pain. After much effort the workers finally made GP management agreed to send them for medical check-up in May 2004. More than 2000 workers have been tested since then, among them 6 had been diagnosed as cadmium poisoning, 300 being categorized as under 'medical observation' because of high level of cadmium in their bodies.

However, the management was not responding to workers' demand for effective medical care and compensation. After the local government refused to help the workers, the latter leaked their story to some Hong Kong media, and then the Hong Kong based Globalization Monitor took up the case, in July 26 it organized a protest against the GP with 33 grass-root organizations participating. Meantime, GP workers organized several strikes to get their voice heard. Under pressure, the GP announced a compensation package in early August, which is higher than what the law required, and then revised up the compensation again in February 2005 after pressure from the workers. The conclusion that could be drawn from this case is clear: both the GP and the local government simply turn a blind eyes to the plight of the workers. And if the workers do not fight for their right, they may not even get any compensation.

China's products are cheap simply because wages are kept ridiculously low, work safety heavily compromised, and workers' basic rights being denied. If we put into account the lives loss, the damaged health of workers, the burden of their family etc, these products are indeed very costly. If we also put into account jobs losses all over the world as a result of China's cheap products, then it is obvious that maintaining the deplorable status quo of work safety and labor management is detrimental both to Chinese workers and working people all over the world.

The informalisation of work for women workers

The oversupply of labor force not only greatly depresses wages, but also forces those unemployed women to look for opportunity in the informal sector. Meanwhile, the Chinese government is also keen in developing this sector as it sees this as a way to absorb the large army of unemployed. Those unemployed former SOEs women workers and rural migrants workers fill the rank of informal sectors. In old industrial belt like the North East provinces, unemployed women workers have to work as hawkers or sex workers in order to stay alive. As for those rural migrant women workers who fail to get a job in the EPZ, they may end up doing babies sitting, hourly paid household workers etc.

According to the Research Institute of Labor and Social Protection Department, it is estimated that today there are 800 million workers in the informal sector, and many of them are women. One research released by the ACFTU points out that informal workers accounts for 48% of the total labor force, and among them rural migrant workers accounts for 54.6%. These informal workers enjoy little protection; only 28.9% had labor contracts with their employers. One third of them have monthly wages below 400 RMB, which is very low.

There are mainly three categories of informal work in China:

- 1 self-employed workers;
- 2 temporary workers and seasonal workers;
- 3 wage labor in small enterprises who enjoy no protection;

According to a report from the Industrial Development Research Institute, which is under the National Development and Reform Committee, women workers are being marginalized in the jobs market, and the informal sector may soon become the chief area of work for women workers. China's accession to WTO will also accelerate the process, because it will result in much more serious competition in domestic market in general and the labor market in particular. Given that women are generally less educated than men, while at the same time they have more household responsibility than men, they will tended to be more marginalized in the competition with men in the search of jobs. When more women workers end up in the informal sectors, it follows that their wages tends to decline. No wonder that one recent study by the research institute of the National Women Association concludes that the wage differences between men and women is increasing, and it is chiefly women who get the bad paid jobs.

Now more women workers than before are beginning to aware of their basic rights and begin to fight for them. It is the responsibility of the international workers movement to support their course, materially and spiritually. Only with such support could Chinese workers be able to advance their emancipation from the oppressive yoke of both the despotic state and the TNCs.

(Note: This is an expanded version of an earlier article "Women workers in Chinese Sweatshops".)

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