

An Interview with Yan Yuanzhang on the China Workers' Website and Discussion Lists

Tuesday 30 October 2007, by [PHILION Stephen](#), [YAN Yuanzhang](#) (Date first published: 13 March 2006).

On February 22nd, the Chinese government shut down the China Workers' Website and Discussion Lists because, according to the order of closure, the owner of such a website must make a 10,000,000 Yuan (US \$1.2 million) deposit to register it as a legal one. The editorial collective responded that they would not be able to pay the fee since they were mostly farmers and employed and unemployed workers without access to such a huge sum. Thus the first leftist-run website in China that enabled workers and farmers to talk about their struggles to defend socialism in today's China was shut down.

Below is an interview I conducted on February 26th with one of the administrators of the China Workers Website editorial collective in Beijing. He, as well as other members of the collective, is evidence of a new generation of leftists in China who are actively involved in struggles of workers and farmers, stepping into the role that the Party rejected long ago.

Q: Now, why would the Chinese government, a socialist government in name, be concerned about a website run by leftists discussing the kinds of things that were discussed on the China Workers Website?

A: Well, because the government is not making socialism.

Q: Of course. I'm asking because outside China there are still some leftists who see China as a socialist country.

A: Well, hearing such nonsense would reduce a pig to tearful fits of laughter!

Our web discussion is designed for workers and farmers to discuss their issues and struggles. This is the kind of thing a socialist democracy would want, for workers to have the kind of democracy that capitalism couldn't provide.

A National People's Congress will be convened soon, and the government knows that workers and farmers' voices will be heard by representatives and might even make way into the speeches made at the Congress. The government doesn't want that — it actually fears even the possibility of it. So, when the national representatives speak, workers are supposed to keep their mouths shut.

Q: The Worker-Farmer discussion list is not routed through a port outside China, but other socialist discussion lists in China have ports abroad and can still be accessed by the Chinese. Why the difference?

A: We believe that a discussion list for Chinese workers should be run within China, for Chinese

workers to participate in. There's no need to go to foreign discussion lists or to seek out foreigners in order to have discussions. If you want to open a web discussion list from an address abroad, you need to negotiate with the government, and it will end up being shut down or administered through a dummy port that requires types of software and technological skills that many workers and farmers don't possess. The result is a discussion list dominated by intellectuals, which will only turn off workers and make them not want to participate.

Q: Is this web discussion list managed by workers?

A: No, it's mainly managed by intellectuals. We do have a forum that is called "Management Issues Forum" that many workers have participated in.

Q: What differences are there between the ways workers and intellectuals engage in discussions on this list? Topics discussed? Ideologies?

A: Well, intellectuals who are able to come to our discussion list and participate in discussions with workers about workers' issues in China are already pretty ahead of the curve. Actually quite a few workers in China's enterprises are intellectuals also. [\[1\]](#)

The main topics discussed are workers' labor relationships with enterprises and economic rights of workers. In this regard, state enterprises are acting more and more like private ones, treating workers as little more than wage laborers, and workers face issues such as forced overtime and low wages. The similarity between exploitation in state enterprises and that in privately owned ones is a special topic of interest to workers.

Ideologically, yes, there surely are different positions and factions. But, overall, those who participate in the discussions share sympathy with workers' struggles in China. They're able to talk about this issue in terms of class and struggle.

Q: Do liberals show up to participate in the discussions often?

A: Rarely, very rarely.

Q: Why?

A: Well, when liberals encounter Chinese workers and their problems, they suddenly have difficulty expressing themselves. They have little to contribute. They can express sympathy for workers, but the thing is that the Chinese workers on these lists generally are against capitalism. Also, workers in these discussions express nostalgia for the Maoist period, which liberals naturally don't share. Of course, liberals believe that today's economic problems are a product of economic policies pursued by Mao.

Also, workers have conflicting feelings about the Communist Party. Today's Chinese workers in discussions express the belief that the Party is dictatorial and is their enemy. Liberals' main slogan is "Down with the Communist Party." But workers differentiate between the Communist Party of the Maoist period and today's Party, which further puts them at odds with liberals.

At the same time, a fair proportion of workers in the discussions also have considerable illusions about capitalist democracy. So, ideologically, Chinese workers are all over the map. They have contradictory feelings about the CCP and about capitalist democracy.

But this is to be expected, since so much of what happened during the Maoist period has been completely repudiated by the media.

Q: Now, how does the Chinese government explain its closing of such a web discussion list?

A: From their vantage, our discussion list has made available information about workers' strikes in China, right? Right-wing websites that are declared enemies of the CCP then take that information and transfer it to their sites. This is detrimental to the image of the Party since foreign media will pick up on such information and use it to attack the CCP. So our website from their vantage is like a stick of dynamite.

Q: And how do you answer such charges?

A: Well, I answer with this analogy. If I go to market to buy a butcher's knife to cut meat with and someone steals it from me and commits murder, am I to understand that I'm the guilty party?

Secondly, if you want to prevent attacks on the Communist Party, it's best you do the right thing in the first place. So, if you're going to violate the rights of workers, how do you get off complaining about attacks on your Communist Party?

If you claim you're the leader of the working class and then you turn around and lay off a huge mass of state-owned enterprise workers, without doing anything to protect the power or interests of the workers' unions, of course you're going to face an angry response from workers.

When they hear this, though, there's no possibility for discussion — they just tell you to close up shop. And they expend not a small amount of resources to make sure you do that — police, bureaucratic officials, etc, all on this case.

Q: What exactly did they say in response?

A: They claim this is a controversial website, one that is political in content. Recently a law was passed that such websites must meet certain conditions before being set up: you need to have 10 million Yuan (1.2 million US Dollars) to register your site. Well, I haven't got that kind of money. As you can see in the announcement that we put out on our website, we stated that we are average working people, not in possession of 10 Million Yuan.

Q: So you have to be a millionaire to open a website for workers to discuss their situation and struggles in China?

A: On one of our forums, someone suggested that, since there have been many millions of state workers laid off in the last decade, each one of them can invest 1 Yuan and save the China Workers' Website!

Q: And is it possible?

A: If it were allowed, I could definitely find the support needed from workers to raise that fee. But the Party would allow no such thing. A Chinese student studying in the US wrote a piece in response asking, "Does this mean that if you have no money you have no right to speak your opinion?" Workers should have the same right to expression that elite business owners have.

China today is basically controlled by a new capitalist class. So, really, to come back to your question about how China is understood by Marxists and leftists outside China: you have to ask what ruling group has most power, in order to understand the nature of the government and its motives.

Ok, once we've established that, we can see that the class that they most fear and despise is the workers and the farmers. But the ones they most deeply dread are those who were originally state-

sector workers, who formed the vanguard of China's working class. Why? Well, this is the angriest group because they've seen their "spouse" [i.e. the CCP and state enterprises] stolen by this new and corrupt class of capitalists in China. So, they struggle to get their "spouse" back. Naturally this raises ire in this new China.

Q: Tell me a little about the main topics of discussion among rural farmers who are on your web discussion list.

A: Most prominent are land ownership, rights issues, health care [inability to pay for medical services], children's education crisis [likewise tied to costs of schooling]

Q: How should leftists outside China understand the significance of your website being shut down by China's authorities?

A: It's possible that not many on the left abroad even know about this matter, since ours is a small website and our reach is not that great outside China. I think they should regard this as part of a struggle on the part of China's workers and farmers to secure their right to express themselves.

You realize at this time some one third of China's business owners are members of the Communist Party! What in the world is this? Who says capitalists can speak for the workers of China?

There are so many workers in China who want to participate in our website and speak their minds. The support they've shown for this website is not for this website in particular — it's for their right to speak out.

Some have said that we on the left in China shouldn't make such a big deal of this, we should find a way around the blockade with the aid of foreign webports, etc. Well, I say, even a little sheep when it is bitten will let out a big yelp — it has to, for that matter. The same for those of us responsible for this little website. The shutting down of a website like ours is, in effect, the silencing of workers who face hardships in today's China. We can't rely on intellectuals to accurately express the terms of those hardships. Nor can we expect them to lead the struggles to resolve the class conflicts that cause their pain.

So it comes down to this: what do we amount to if we don't use our abilities to aid workers in China to express themselves amid their struggles?

So, you asked me if we could do this or that to get around the blockade. Those are technical issues; for us, the issue at hand is the right of Chinese workers to run their own web discussion lists to express themselves without having to encounter obstacles in their own country. It's for this reason that we must continue to struggle and fight for this right. And it's our hope that leftists outside China will support Chinese workers in this endeavor as they fight for their right, demanding the restoration of this workers' website.

P.S.

* From the Monthly Review, MRzien:

<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/philion130306.html>

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Struggle in the Moment of Transition from State Socialism in China” is available at <stephenphilion.efoliomn2.com/index.asp> . Yan Yuanzhang is a pseudonym used to protect the interviewee’s identity from the Chinese government’s scrutiny.

Footnotes

[1] An “intellectual” in this context does not mean a “professional academic” but one who has educational training at one level or another, such as an accountant, an engineer, a more highly skilled craft worker, etc.