

Struggles Against Capitalist Rule in Modern China

Rui Preti

a review of

China On Strike: Narratives of Workers' Resistance edited by Hao Ren; English edition edited by Zhong Jin Li and Eli Friedman. Haymarket Books, 2016

Striking to Survive: Workers Resistance to Factory Relocations in China by Fan Shigang, translated by Henry Moss. Haymarket Books, 2018

The modern state of China, by capitalist standards, is generally thriving. The nation's economic growth rate, considered to be a prime indicator of prosperity, is significantly higher than that of the western industrialized countries, even with its recent slowdowns.

According to *The New York Times*, "China now leads the world in the number of homeowners, internet users, college graduates and, by some counts, billionaires."

But most ordinary Chinese still lead lives of exploitation by the wealthy few. This has sparked ongoing protests, despite the clear authoritarian character of the government and the reality that in disputes it most often takes the side of those running state owned or privately managed enterprises.

The titles reviewed here offer translations of Chinese workers' accounts of recent work-related protests collected by activists of the underground Chinese periodical *Factory Stories* (Gongchang Longmenzhen).

China on Strike provides firsthand narratives of fifteen different struggles, spanning the first decade of the 21st century.

Striking To Survive centers around the recollections of nine workers active in strikes protesting the relocation plans of one Chinese-based, Hong Kong-owned factory, from late 2012 through 2016 and a shorter description of a comparable struggle in a different enterprise from 2014 to 2015.

Together, these two books provide detailed descriptions of one important aspect of modern Chinese everyday life: the constant reality of worker unrest, and the refusal of government at any level to help workers being cheated by the bosses, even assisting employers with the police.

In China during the past thirty years, there have been thousands of protests by workers against poor and unsafe working conditions, long hours, low wages, withholding of pay, outsourcing, and the ongoing relocation of enterprises by employers constantly seeking cheaper labor costs.

Despite the highly structured semi-militarized factory system of control and domination, many workers have repeatedly found ways to join together to protest and resist. Workers in some struggles developed solidarity with students and university teachers, who helped to publicize their plight.

Some of the protests have been long-lasting and very militant, involving large numbers of workers. The Hong Kong-based *China Labour Bulletin* reports several simultaneous protests in multiple cities to disrupt and pressure large employers such as Foxconn, Walmart, China Unicom, and Neutrogena (a subsidiary of the American multinational, Johnson & Johnson).

Outside the workplace, people living in the path of state infrastructure projects facing eviction by local governments and developers have become actively involved in protests against their displacement.

There have also been protests against land dispossession, overuse of natural resources and industrial pollution, as well as struggles for civil liberties, civil rights, freedom to hold and discuss dissenting social-political perspectives, feminist and student issues, and free expression in the arts. Although all of these activities are periodically met with draconian state repression, they spring up again and again.

There has also been an inspiring persistence of anarchist ideas in China over the past 120 years, beginning decades before the Maoists took power, and continuing to re-emerge despite the Chinese Communist Party and government's attempts to obliterate them.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many young people involved in the Cultural Revolution became disillusioned with the entire regime. Some dedicated the rest of their lives to being truth tellers inside and outside the Chinese state.

Some fled to Hong Kong and became the anarchists of the Seventies Front who published a magazine in the 1970s called Minus and participated in protests. They went on to help reawaken anarchist ideas in Hong Kong and even mainland China in the 1980s and 1990s.

Some carried on into the 21st century, engaging in cultural and social activities that encouraged anarchist conversations both inside and outside the country, including most recently through the Hong Kong Black Book anarchist book fair held in 2017.

(See "Hong Kong's Black Book Fair," FE #400, Spring 2018, and "Hong Kong: Where Anarchists & Blackbirds Sing About Freedom," FE #381, Summer-Fall 2009.)

But many of those who express opposition to the Chinese government or private employers experience high individual and social cost, such as police attacks and imprisonment.

Nevertheless, instead of silencing protesters and dissenters, the brutality of the government and employers has convinced many in China that any improvement in their condition will have to come through their own actions.

As *China On Strike* and *Striking to Survive* document, so far most workers' struggles seek redress of grievances that are supposedly granted by the legal system, often with the help of labor rights and human rights lawyers and activists.

But the response of government on all levels has been increasing repression rather than greater liberalization a la a new deal style compromise that could give people a somewhat larger share of the wealth and a little less regulation of expression in return for a lessening of social unrest. The Chinese Communist regime is convinced their hold on power would be endangered by the kind of loosening up of political discipline that the bureaucrats of Soviet Russia undertook in the 1980s, which was followed by the downfall of the Soviet system.

The future is uncharted as to whether the government can tighten and strengthen its hold on power, or whether the recurring protests and resistance will be able to develop forms of struggle that create authentic social transformation.

Rui Preti is a long-time friend of the *Fifth Estate* and a great believer in the value of continuous questioning and challenging the status quo.

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