

1925

In the 1920s, the efforts of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at labour organising reached their apex with the organisation of a series of national labour conferences (全国劳动大会) aimed at bringing together trade unions of all political stripes to seek common ground for their struggles. The first conference took place on 1 May 1922 in Guangzhou and saw the participation of 160 delegates from 200 trade unions in twelve cities, claiming to represent around 300,000 workers.¹ On that occasion, the participants appointed the CCP-affiliated Chinese Trade Union Secretariat to be the coordinating body for the labour movement in China until a proper national trade union federation could be established—a decision that some see as a watershed moment for the CCP’s assertion of leadership over the Chinese labour movement.² It took three more years for the Second National Labour Conference—which took place in May 1925, with the presence of 230 delegates representing more than half a million workers—to establish a national umbrella organisation for Chinese labour organisations in the form of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU, 中华全国总工会).³ This was the first truly national trade union in China—an organisation that, despite a long and tortuous history, remains in existence to this day. This essay reflects on the significance of the ACFTU’s foundation in the context of the CCP’s strategy in those years.

The Founding of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions

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On 1 May 1925, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (中华全国总工会, ACFTU) was founded in Guangzhou to organise Chinese workers to struggle against the political and economic systems of the time, bringing together 166 affiliated trade unions, comprising more than 540,000 members.⁴ Considered the first formally established umbrella organisation for all ‘true’ worker unions in China, the ACFTU was first and foremost a sign of cooperation between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, or GMD).⁵

The formation of this organisation reflected the interest and growing influence of the Communist International (Comintern) in China. Acting as an international arm of the Soviet Union to promote global communism, the Comintern was heavily involved in the Chinese Revolution, providing military advisors, weapons and money to both the CCP and the GMD. This policy was motivated by the belief of the Soviet leadership that only a united workers’ movement of the CCP and GMD could hasten the Chinese Revolution and would better serve Soviet interests in the Far East.

As a result of this alliance under the Comintern, the ACFTU was not a CCP department. Instead, it functioned as a platform to coordinate different forces among workers, including non-party actors.⁶ A party faction system (党团制度) was introduced in what could be considered a ‘nondenominational’ organisation. Under this system, the CCP in the ACFTU functioned as a corporatist organ to democratically represent its own interests amid other factions and was therefore unable to dominate the decision-making process through its own model of democratic centralisation.⁷ However, there was precedent for such a powersharing arrangement, as the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union implemented a party faction system in their trade union and other mass organisations. In this case, the CCP sacrificed its dominant position among the Chinese working class in return for the opportunity to build a broader labour movement.

Changing Worker Mobilisation Strategy

Localism, clan cultures and regional economic disparities negatively affected any effort to organise Chinese workers in those early years. In addition, most workers laboured in small and medium-sized workshops, as there were few large factories. They lacked class consciousness and, in most cases, cared only about their immediate material interests, rather than labour rights or unionisation.⁸ To overcome such fragmentation, the CCP had to build a durable and extensive organisational structure and develop sophisticated mobilisation techniques. To pursue this goal, in 1921, the Communist leadership established the Chinese Trade Union Secretariat (中国劳动组合书记部) in Shanghai—an organisation that operated as the *de facto* worker organising department of the CCP (see Lin Chun's essay in the present volume).

When the CCP decided to unionise workers in a certain region or firm, it would name a special commissioner. Under the principle of democratic centralism, the special commissioner exercised the final say in every decision in her or his domain. Although this organisational arrangement was designed for secret worker mobilisation in a repressive environment, its success relied heavily on the individual talents of the special commissioners.⁹ A series of failed organising attempts, including the thwarted 7 February Strike (二七大罢工) launched by Beijing and Hankou railway workers in 1923 and the setbacks that followed the initial successes of the worker movement in Anyuan (see Luo Zhanglong's and Perry's essays in the present volume), alerted the Comintern and the CCP to the shortcomings of this mobilisation strategy.¹⁰ Institutional adaptations and improvements were necessary.

First, at the Fourth National Congress of the CCP in January 1925, the Party's leadership acknowledged that since the Chinese working class was weak, they needed to form a coalition between workers, peasants and women's and youth movements to build a revolutionary force.¹¹ The ACFTU reflected this new strategy. Contrary to the claim by mainstream researchers in China that the founding of the ACFTU announced total leadership of the CCP over the Chinese workers' movement, by establishing this organisation, the Communist Party recognised factional politics in the Chinese workers' movement and opened a channel for all actors to raise demands and concerns related to labour struggles.¹² In other words, the introduction of the ACFTU represented a strategic move by the CCP to show its willingness to cooperate with all factions in the Chinese labour

movement, rather than declaring its supremacy. This included the GMD and progressive gang leaders, who now could democratically participate in the decision-making by transforming the conventional Communist Party chain-of-command framework into a party faction system, under which the CCP was only one component. This was a direct outcome of the cooperation between the CCP and the GMD, which also saw CCP members of the ACFTU Executive Committee joining the GMD and playing active roles in its labour department.

A second innovation can be found in the ways Communist labour organisers began to engage gang leaders. Already in Anyuan, CCP organisers had begun to recognise the unavoidable importance of gang leaders in worker organising. Gangs were a societal response of the Chinese underclass to poverty and deprivation. In the early twentieth century, a deepening wealth gap haunted China. In Shanghai, the lowest wage of a worker was three to seven times higher than that of a peasant, but 80 percent of Shanghai's residents lived in poverty and could barely feed themselves or their families.¹³ Gangs provided a collective network of protection and welfare for member workers. For these reasons, more than 80 percent of Chinese miners at that time belonged to gangs.¹⁴ In addition, gangs were embedded in the workplace as a human resource management structure.¹⁵ It was common practice for firms to contract out labour, with gangmasters serving as both recruiters and foremen.

To unionise, the CCP needed to understand how gangs operated and recruited their members.¹⁶ With this aim in mind, senior Communist leaders, such as Deng Zhongxia and Li Lisan, interacted with and even joined gangs like the Green Gang (青帮) and the Hong Men (洪门). The CCP used this approach to hijack the gang structure and to plant Party cells in Chinese workplaces, so as to remake the gangs into modern trade unions.¹⁷ At the same time, the GMD was using a similar mobilisation approach to manipulate gang influence.¹⁸

Organisational Structure

The Comintern exerted a decisive influence over the organisational design of the ACFTU. The highest authority was the Executive Committee (执行委员会), led by a chairman and three vice-chairmen. The National Congress (全国代表大会) of the federation met once a year. The number of representatives was determined by the Executive Committee, which comprised twenty-five members elected by the National Congress.

The first Executive Committee was elected at the Second National Labour Conference (第二次全国劳动大会), in May 1925—the event, organised by the CCP-affiliated Chinese Trade Union Secretariat and attended by both Communist and Nationalist participants, which inaugurated the ACFTU. The chairman and vice-chairmen of the organisation's first Executive Committee were men. Lin Weimin, a noted CCP labour leader, was elected chairman but fell ill after less than a year and had to quit the post (he died in September 1927). The three vice-chairmen were Liu Shaoqi, Deng Pei and Zheng Yimin, alias Zheng Zesheng. As Lin relinquished his position due to illness, Liu—who had made a name for himself as a labour organiser during the Anyuan strike of 1922 (see Perry's essay in the present volume)—became the ACFTU's acting chairman. In the following decades, Liu would remain active in the Chinese workers' movement while also climbing the ranks of the CCP bureaucracy, eventually becoming Vice-Chairman of the Party and President of the People's Republic of China after 1949, before being dragged into a power struggle with Mao Zedong and suffering a violent death in 1969 during the Cultural Revolution.

Liu's two colleagues on the first Executive Committee of the ACFTU followed different trajectories. After being elected vice-chairman, Deng Pei became a strong supporter of workers' armed struggle. He also took the position as chairman of the Guangdong Federation of Trade Unions. As a CCP member, Deng followed the orders of the Comintern and joined the GMD to strengthen the coalition between the two parties. After the 1927 split, the GMD army raided the ACFTU's facilities in Guangzhou; Deng was arrested and executed that year. Zheng Yimin maintained his position as ACFTU Vice-Chairman for only one year, when his name simply disappeared from the Executive Committee and little is known about what became of him.

Despite fluctuation in its leadership, the ACFTU had a clear organisational structure. There was an Executive Bureau (干事局) under the direct supervision of the Executive Committee, with personnel appointed by the latter. The Executive Bureau had four departments: the Organisation Department (组织部) was responsible for unionising workers; the Secretariat (秘书部) looked after administrative affairs; the Propaganda Department (宣传部) was responsible for public relations and worker education; and the Economy Department (经济部) was in charge of accounting and finance. In addition, according to the ACFTU Constitution passed in 1925, the Executive Committee could establish special field offices and special commissions/organisations for its 'convenience'.¹⁹

These special units were designed to cope with the secrecy required for labour organising. In practice, they opened a space for the Executive Committee to bypass the formal channels of the ACFTU and to conduct covert actions.

The CCP's control over the Executive Committee gave it an advantage in the democratic process in the ACFTU. All twenty-five elected members of the ACFTU's first Executive Committee were CCP members. Despite the fact that most ACFTU Executive Committee members also held GMD membership, the CCP membership was more disciplined when compared with the GMD and therefore better equipped to exert their influence within both the federation and the GMD itself. In fact, the Comintern secretly insisted that the CCP monitor GMD activities and stand against any attempt by the Nationalists to 'hook up' with anti-Soviet forces.²⁰

Heightening Distrust and Conflict

Founding the ACFTU was part of the Comintern and Soviet Union's China strategy. They planned for the CCP and GMD to join forces and confront the warlord government, which it was hoped would expand Soviet interests in China.²¹ By introducing a party faction system within the ACFTU, the CCP and the Comintern signalled their willingness to share power among different facets of the labour movement. However, other dynamics were also in play. While openly adopting such a system, Communist leaders covertly hoped to reduce the suspicion of the GMD and gangs towards their ranks, which would enable the CCP to establish Party cells in all major trade unions and worker organisations.

Senior worker leaders within the CCP were keen to use the ACFTU as a platform to increase CCP power in the labour movement. They saw the cooperation with the GMD as a tactical move to transform Nationalist-led trade unions into CCP affiliates. In the words of Deng Zhongxia, an Executive Committee member and first general secretary of the ACFTU in 1925, the party faction system was a method to extend Communist reach in trade unions. As a result, the ACFTU always prioritised mobilising workers against the political and economic status quo.²²

Soon gang leaders became dissatisfied with escalating worker militancy led by the ACFTU. As the ACFTU hastened workers' struggle, GMD leaders viewed the Comintern and the CCP as rival forces and began to resent what increasingly felt like imposed cooperation with the CCP. A forceful collision was on the horizon, and eventually things came to

a head in 1927, when the alliance between the two parties broke down and GMD forces, assisted by gangs, slaughtered workers and Communist labour organisers in Shanghai (see S.A. Smith's essay on 1927 in the present volume). Among the four chairmen of ACFTU's First Executive Committee in 1925, only Liu Shaoqi lived to witness the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.