

## 1948

*As the civil war between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Nationalist Party was drawing to a close, labour unrest was again on the rise. However, in those years, the CCP's relationship with worker activism was ambiguous. Although some radical voices in the Party still held that final victory for their cause would come through a series of worker uprisings, the Party leadership did not want to risk alienating capitalists and entrepreneurs whose cooperation would be necessary for postwar reconstruction. Already in April 1945, the Seventh Congress of the CCP pledged to improve labour conditions while protecting the interests of entrepreneurs in the spirit of Mao Zedong's 'New Democracy'. In the same vein, in August 1948, the Sixth All-China Labour Congress revived the old Nationalist slogan of cooperation between labour and capital (劳资合作), reframing it as 'mutual benefits for labour and capital' (劳资两利). The primary message was that workers should be discouraged from confrontations with employers and instead focus on forming 'factory protection teams' to prevent destruction of machinery and raw materials as the CCP took over cities like Shanghai. This essay looks at the role of women in the labour unrest of that period.*

# Women Workers and the Shanghai Cotton Mill Strike of 1948

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In early 1948, at the Shen Xin Number Nine Cotton Mill in Shanghai, 6,000 women went on strike. Their demands included distribution of rice and coal rations and enforcement of provisions for paid maternity leave. The women occupied the mill for four days. They selected representatives from each workshop to demand a meeting with the mill's management. Meanwhile, in the spinning room, women sat on top of bobbin bins; in the weaving workshop, they made themselves comfortable on bolts of cloth; and in the roving room, they collected bundles of roving and fashioned them into pillows. Initially, groups of women in each workshop sat, eating dried melon seeds, and chatted.

As both mill managers and the police pressured them to end the strike, workers began to collect bricks, machine parts, metal food bowls and oil drums filled with rocks to use as ammunition, moving them to the factory roof on bobbin and yarn-transporting carts. Ultimately, it took several hundred policemen equipped with three army tanks, deploying tear and vomit gas, to force them out of the mill, killing three women workers and injuring five hundred. So violent was this strike that it came to be known as the 'February Second Bloodbath' at Shen Xin Nine.

In the context of the Shanghai labour movement in the first half of the twentieth century, this episode stands out as an almost unparalleled instance of women workers boldly and decisively unifying to demand improved conditions. Yet understanding the significance of this strike requires consideration of industrial development in Shanghai, the composition of the labour force and organisations that shaped labour activism, including the Green Gang, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).

## Social and Economic Divisions

The Shen Xin cotton mill was one of a number of mills established in Shanghai by the Rong family in the early twentieth century. With mills owned by British, Japanese and other Chinese capitalists, the cotton textile industry accounted for roughly half of the industrial workforce in Shanghai

from the 1920s through to the 1940s, with women representing 75 percent of the workforce.<sup>1</sup> Most mills employed male workers for machine repair and transport of cotton and yarn, while women were the overwhelming majority of workers in the spinning, roving and weaving workshops.

In almost all sectors of the Shanghai workforce, labour activism was conditioned by divisions among workers. As with workers in other enterprises, women in cotton mills were neither a unified nor a homogeneous group; rather, they were divided both socially and economically by native place. The majority of skilled workers came from the relatively wealthy Jiangnan and the parts of Jiangsu and Zhejiang south of the Yangzi River, such as Wuxi, Changzhou and Ningbo; most of the unskilled workers migrated from poverty-stricken Subei, the area of Jiangsu north of the Yangzi, including Yangzhou, Taizhou and Yancheng.<sup>2</sup> Depending on which area they came from, women spoke different and mutually unintelligible dialects, dressed differently and had distinctive eating habits.

Within the cotton mills, women from Jiangnan and Subei worked in different workshops. In general, women from the north, who were considered by mill managers to be strong, robust and accustomed to dirt, were concentrated in workshops where the work was most arduous and dirty—for instance, reeling and roving—while those from Jiangnan dominated jobs in the higher-paying weaving shops. Thus, although they technically worked in a single enterprise, workers from different native places did not necessarily have much contact with one another.

Segregation was only one aspect of the relationship between women from Jiangnan and Subei, who often treated each other with contempt and hostility. Membership of their own mutual aid and social organisations, the ‘sisterhoods’, invariably consisted of women from the same native place. In some cases, the sisterhoods included supervisors and even gang members from their home counties. Native place, then, took precedence over status in the workforce. And, in pledging sisterhood, women workers confirmed bonds among those from the same native place, while emphasising the separateness of those from different native places.

### Women on Strike

In spite of these divisions among workers of different origins, the historical record abounds with strikes involving thousands of women. From the opening of the first cotton mills in Shanghai through to the 1940s, there were occasions when women workers shut off their machines and left the

factories. One of the most dramatic moments in the labour movement centred on the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925 (see Leong's essay in the present volume), which triggered numerous strikes in the cotton mills, with statistical records indicating that often the majority of the strikers were women. However, the simple fact that women struck does not necessarily represent a radical or revolutionary agenda. For example, one of the strikes in 1925 was instigated by male workers in the roving department who had been dismissed from their jobs and replaced with women. During the protest, activists physically barred women from going into the mill. So, although women did not go to work and therefore appeared to be 'on strike', they were not acting voluntarily to assert their own demands. In another strike, when many hundreds of male workers smashed machinery as they rushed through the cotton mill to begin a strike, women workers fled outside. Again, in the statistical record, it appears that women workers who had exited the mill were on strike.

There were, to be sure, strikes in the 1920s that were initiated and organised by women workers themselves. While some issued demands for pay increases and protested beatings by foremen and supervisors, many strikes organised by women sought to defend traditional loyalties. In one case, police were summoned to control a strike involving 3,000 women workers protesting management's refusal to hire the woman introduced for a job by their supervisor. As Elizabeth Perry points out, male cotton mill workers, too, sometimes participated in strikes for less-than-radical reasons. For instance, she quotes one worker who recalled student members of the CCP instructing workers to strike, which they did because of the promise the Party would provide their pay during the time they did not work.<sup>3</sup>

During this period, it appears that the most radical participants in the Shanghai labour movement were not the unskilled cotton mill workers, but rather the educated artisans—printers, postal workers and mechanics—most of whom came from Jiangnan and were most sympathetic to the cause of the CCP. In cotton mills, CCP membership in the mid-1920s consisted primarily of the skilled male workers: copper fitters, woodworkers and mechanics.<sup>4</sup> It is possible that the inability of the CCP to effectively organise women mill workers may be partly due to the fact that it had only a few female organisers, all of whom came from Hunan and therefore did not speak a dialect intelligible to women in the cotton mills. In addition, viewing the sisterhoods as 'feudal' organisations, the CCP did not use them as a basis for organising. It may also be because,

as S.A. Smith points out in his study of Shanghai labour, CCP leaders in the 1920s did not approve of separate organisations for women workers, aspiring as they were to the expression of an undivided class solidarity among factory workers.<sup>5</sup>

Between the YWCA and the Communist Party

Understanding the militant activism of women workers during the 1948 Shen Xin strike requires consideration of several transformations that took place during the 1930s and 1940s. One of the most important changes concerned the role of the YWCA, the first external organisation that women workers joined. Although the number of women who participated in YWCA programs was never more than a small fraction of the female workforce, an overwhelming majority of the women workers who became activists in the labour movement and in the CCP attributed their initial 'political awakening' to the night schools for women workers run by the YWCA.

Offering programs in several Chinese cities since the late nineteenth century, the YWCA began with a primarily foreign staff who focused on providing general social welfare for women. Ironically, its project of educating women workers to become leaders in the labour movement emerged in the wake of the White Terror of 1927 that resulted in most CCP activists fleeing cities such as Shanghai (see S.A. Smith's essay on 1927 in the present volume). From then until the outbreak of war with Japan in 1937, the Nationalist government enacted a series of laws prohibiting labour organising and strike activity. This left the YWCA as one of the only organisations in Shanghai that quietly and modestly tried to instil in women a radical understanding of their position as both women and workers. In addition to classes on writing, geography and history, the night schools offered ones on imperialism, capitalism and labour laws, as well as training the students in public speaking. Meanwhile, by the late 1920s, most of the YWCA staff, including the heads of most of its bureaus, were Chinese rather than European or American women.

A second transformation concerned the CCP, particularly its role and organising strategy during the war with Japan. During the war, tactics the CCP had used during the 1920s—such as making speeches and distributing leaflets—were not viable, as the Japanese arrested blatantly political activists. Under these circumstances, the CCP began to adapt organisational forms that already existed among women workers, such as the

sisterhoods and YWCA schools, adhering to directions issued by CCP labour leaders such as Ma Chunji. Rather than viewing sisterhoods as 'backwards', CCP activists began encouraging women workers to pledge sisterhood with other workers; they accompanied them to Buddhist temples, burned incense with them and pledged loyalty to each other. Like the traditional sisterhoods, those encouraged by the CCP sometimes included supervisors and women married to gang members. In fact, some CCP activists pledged to become the goddaughters of supervisors. During the war, the CCP did not try to mobilise its recruits to engage in a revolutionary movement, but instead tried to organise women workers to subvert production in as many inconspicuous ways as possible in the mills now owned primarily by the Japanese, whether by stealing yarn and cloth from the workshops or slowing the speed of the machines to decrease production and therefore Japanese profits.

Many of these practices continued into the postwar period. For instance, the CCP continued to use the tradition of pledging sisterhood as a way of organising women who worked together in the mills. The sisterhoods initiated by the CCP moved further and further away from the relative spontaneity of the traditional sisterhoods, becoming much more calculated and deliberate. In some instances, the CCP conducted sisterhood-pledging ceremonies in each workshop of particular factories, establishing aggressive political groups rather than the defensive mutual aid organisations of the past. Furthermore, they often held meetings under the guise of innocuous sisterhood get-togethers.

The YWCA of the late 1940s was also far different from the foreign-run missionary organisation it had been in the 1920s. It may not have espoused revolution, but it provided women the education, social analysis skills and organisational ability they needed to become both active participants in and leaders of a revolutionary worker's movement. In addition, the CCP recognised the crucial role the YWCA played and strategised to have Party members get jobs as teachers in the schools—some decades later claiming that the Party actually ran the YWCA night schools. All of this meant that, from the vantage point of the women mill workers, the CCP was no longer an alien organisation, composed of outsiders and intellectuals who spoke unintelligible dialects. Most of the Party activists responsible for organising women in the mills now were coworkers, neighbours, friends, classmates at the night schools or pledged sisters of the women they sought to organise.

## United for Tomorrow

This, then, is the context in which the 1948 strike at the Shen Xin Number Nine Cotton Mill took place. The role of women workers in that strike, subsequent research suggests, is somewhat more complicated than the image of several thousand unskilled women workers uniting in a quasi-revolutionary movement. Elizabeth Perry points out that the CCP leader of the strike was a male metalworker and the strike headquarters were in the machine shops, dominated by skilled male workers.<sup>6</sup> Male and female strikers were not always unified, as indicated by Perry's account of male CCP members in the mill physically assaulting a leader of women workers, accusing her of being sympathetic to the Nationalist Party.

This does not mean that the role of women workers should be underestimated. Even if the CCP continued to focus on recruiting skilled artisans in the postwar period, women workers nonetheless played an active role in the labour movement. In the Shen Xin mill, they reportedly stood on tables in the workshops to deliver speeches; some, who had taken classes at the YWCA night schools, went from workshop to workshop performing skits to dramatise strike issues and teaching workers inspirational songs. Learning about the strike at the YWCA night schools, women workers from other factories established support committees and organised to bring supplies of bread and vegetables for the striking workers. Among those who came to express support for the strike were representatives of the Shanghai dance hostesses' organisation, who were themselves engaged in a protest movement. By the strike's end, three women activists were dead, 500 injured and more than 100 arrested.

Although a number of the strikers' demands were eventually granted by mill managers, the aftermath of the strike was overshadowed by much larger political events. By mid-1949, victory for the CCP was imminent. Although the success of the strike was cheered at the All-China Labour Congress held by the CCP in Harbin in August 1948, the primary message of the meeting was that workers should be discouraged from conflicts and confrontations with mill managers and owners and instead should form 'factory protection teams' to prevent destruction of the machinery and raw materials before and during the CCP takeover of cities like Shanghai.

The Shen Xin strike was not forgotten, however. The women who participated were celebrated as revolutionary heroines in one of the first feature films made by the Shanghai Film Studio after liberation, *United for Tomorrow*. The film's message was that the strike was no less than a

dramatic display of 'sisterly solidarity'. Unrecognised by the film, however, was that even if the strike highlighted a dramatic shift in women's role in the Shanghai labour movement from the 1920s to the 1940s, the display of solidarity was almost invariably informed by native-place loyalties and divisions. As David Strand, in his study of Beijing labourers, points out, a strike—like any other mass movement—was 'not a solvent capable of breaking down barriers based on status, native place or division of labor so much as it was an opportunity to display these divisions in public'.<sup>7</sup>