

# 1957

*In 1956, the Party-State completed the nationalisation of industry. Although official propaganda hailed this as a historic step towards the end of class struggle and capitalist exploitation, many workers saw their conditions deteriorate. In the past, they felt morally entitled to fight their employers and could even hope to receive some support from the union and the Party, but after the state assumed control over enterprises, they lost any moral and political ground on which to stake their claims.*

*In this period, management's despotic power over the working class, alongside a maladroit reform of the wage system carried out in the second semester of 1956, heavily hit the material interests of the workers, leading to a wave of strikes.<sup>1</sup> Politically, one of the consequences of labour unrest was a debate on the right to strike, which was missing from both the Common Program of 1949 and the Chinese Constitution of 1954. Mao Zedong first raised the issue during a meeting of the Central Committee in March 1956 when he stated that 'it is necessary to allow the workers to go on strike, allow the masses to protest. The demonstrations have their basis in the Constitution. If in the future the Constitution is to be amended, I suggest adding a freedom of strike, it is necessary to let the workers go on strike. This can benefit the resolution of the contradictions between the workers, the directors of the factories and the masses.'<sup>2</sup>*

*Mao took up the issue again in February 1957, in his famous speech 'On the Correct Handling of the Contradictions among the People'.<sup>3</sup> In it, he argued that contradictions among workers, and between workers and the national bourgeoisie, were to be considered 'contradictions among the people' (人民内部矛盾) and therefore had to be solved through the method of 'unity-criticism-unity' (团结-批评-团结). In his speech, Mao specifically quoted episodes of worker unrest that had taken place the previous year, labelling them 'disorders created by a small number of individuals', and explained that they had three different roots: the failure of the Party to satisfy the economic requests of the workers, a bureaucratic approach by the leadership and the inadequate political and ideological education of the workers. He blamed the masses for not understanding the long-term,*

*national and collective interests, but at the same time recognised that such events could occur again in the future and suggested using them as examples to improve the work of the Party.*

*After less than a month, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) formally adopted Mao's ideas in an official document titled 'Directive of the Central Committee of the CCP on the Handling of Strikes by Workers and Students'.<sup>4</sup> This document—which to this day remains the only official public statement by the Communist leadership on how to deal with strikes—espoused Mao's point of view on the reasons for labour unrest in China. It claimed that, in the event the masses were deprived of their democratic rights and had no choice other than adopting extreme measures such as strikes or protests, these actions 'were not only unavoidable, but also necessary', and therefore had to be allowed. The directive stated that these actions absolutely did not go against the Constitution—and therefore there was no reason to forbid them—but at the same time suggested the Party committees penetrate the lines of the people on strike, to take the lead and prevent the masses from being 'stranded on the wrong way by some bad elements'. In the whole directive, the union was mentioned only three times—twice in passing and once just to emphasise that the Party committees had to 'lead the union and the youth league to actively reflect the opinions and the requests of the masses'.*

*Mao's February speech marked the launch of the Hundred Flowers Campaign. Under the slogan 'Let one hundred flowers bloom and one hundred schools of thought contend' (百花齐放, 百家争鸣), the Party leadership invited the people to freely voice their opinions and criticisms. It took a while for the campaign to gain momentum, but eventually more and more citizens, especially intellectuals and members of the democratic parties, started voicing their criticisms. In early May, the national leadership of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) weighed in on the debate through the pages of the union mouthpiece, the Workers' Daily (工人日报). On 8 May 1957, Chen Yongwen, then chief editor of the newspaper, ran a long interview with Lai Ruoyu, the union official who had replaced Li Lisan as chairman of the ACFTU after his downfall in 1951.<sup>5</sup> In this exchange, republished the following day in the People's Daily (人民日报), Lai tackled the fundamental issue of the position of the union in relation to the Party—dangerous territory, the misnavigation of which had led to the political disgrace of his predecessor.*

The following day, the Workers' Daily published another critical piece—a report on a long investigative journey undertaken in the previous months by Li Xiuren, Deputy Director of the ACFTU General Office.<sup>6</sup> This '8,000 li' trip had taken Li and an unnamed member of the CCP Central Committee through a dozen cities along the Beijing–Hankou and Hankou–Guangzhou railway lines. In every city in which they stopped, Li and his companion found clear hints of the 'crisis of the union', with frustrated workers blaming the ACFTU for being nothing more than the 'tail of the administration' (行政的尾巴), a 'department for the management of the workers' (工人管理科) and a 'tongue of bureaucratism' (官僚主义的舌头). They found that workers were striving to establish their own autonomous organisations. Many union cadres complained about the difficulty of their position: even if they wanted to support the rightful requests of the masses, they could not, because they were pressed between their obligation to represent the masses and the imperative of respecting Party discipline. They were particularly concerned with being accused of 'syndicalism' (工团主义), 'tailism' (尾巴主义), 'independence from the Party' (对党闹独立) and even losing their Party membership. Some union cadres in Guangdong complained of being 'fourth-level cadres' (四等干部), subordinated to Party cadres, management and even technicians.

The publication of these two articles opened a heated debate about the role and functions of the union in socialist China. In May and June 1957, the Chinese press published a great number of articles that dealt with the issue of the perceived impotence of the union in representing workers' rights.<sup>7</sup> Some of these essays even put forward radical proposals, as in the case of Gao Yuan, then Director of the Archival Department of the ACFTU Central Office, who argued that, if necessary, the union should take up arms against the Party.<sup>8</sup> Unsurprisingly, on the receiving end of such criticisms, the Party once again stepped in. On 19 June 1957, the People's Daily published Mao's February speech, but the printed version was slightly different from the original one, for it emphasised *ex post* the boundaries that should not have been crossed in the debate—namely, the political legitimacy of the Party.

The national leadership of the ACFTU was caught in the ensuing wave of repression. Exactly as had happened in 1951 with the fall of Li Lisan, in September 1957, an enlarged meeting of the ACFTU Party Group was called to deliberate on two fundamental issues: the validity of the resolu-

tion adopted in November 1951 on the struggle against economism and syndicalism and the functions and role of the union under the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>9</sup> On 5 September, Lai Ruoyu gave a long speech in which he substantially confirmed the validity of the 1951 report, attacking the line of Li Lisan and giving up any vestige of independence for the union.<sup>10</sup> Then, at the end of 1957, the Eighth Congress of the ACFTU laid the basis for the decentralisation of the union in anticipation of the Great Leap Forward. In the following months, at least twenty-two high-level cadres of the ACFTU were purged, among them the chief editor of the Workers' Daily, Chen Yongwen. In May 1958, Lai Ruoyu died of illness. This second crisis left the union weaker than ever, depriving it of its most outspoken personalities.<sup>11</sup> From that moment, the ACFTU stopped playing any meaningful role in the Chinese workplace, until its eventual dissolution during the Cultural Revolution (see Thornton's essay in the present volume).

In the following two chapters, we offer a translation of Lai Ruoyu's 1957 interview and an analysis of worker unrest in that momentous year.

# How Do Unions Handle Contradictions among the People?

LAI Ruoyu

(Translated by Malcolm THOMPSON)<sup>12</sup>

*When union organisations at all levels recently discussed the problem of how to handle contradictions among the people correctly, they raised some questions about how to understand them. On 7 May of this year, a reporter from Workers' Daily interviewed Lai Ruoyu, Chairman of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, and he provided his views on the reporter's question as follows.*

Do Contradictions Exist between Unions and the Working Masses?

Reporter: In discussing the correct handling of contradictions among the people, there are people who think that because the principal contradictions among the people are contradictions between the masses and the leadership, and unions are mass organisations, as a result, contradictions exist between the workers and enterprise management, but contradictions between union organisations and the working masses do not. Do you think this view is correct?

Lai Ruoyu: It is true that a union is an organisation of the masses themselves. But a union is in such a position that, on one side, it is a mass organisation and should represent the views of the masses and, on another side, it is not a single individual. It has a national unified organisation, and as a part of this kind of organisation it should understand the overall situation and the present state of the country. It should also represent the long-term interests of the masses and persuade the masses in a patient manner of the incorrectness of some of their views.

Being in this position results in a certain number of disadvantages for the union. Being in this position, the union should understand the situation of both the [enterprise] leadership and the masses, and bring the union organisation into play to perform a regulatory role in the correct handling of contradictions among the people. But this position that the union organisation occupies can give rise to contradictions with respect to both the leadership and the masses. When the union, reflecting the

views of the masses, encounters bureaucratism among the enterprise leadership, this can give rise to contradictions. When it encounters certain incorrect ideas among the masses, the union engages in work to explain things, and here, too, contradictions may arise.

The question certainly is not whether contradictions will arise between the union organisation and the working masses. More importantly, it is how to handle the contradictions that may emerge. The union should, in the first place, stand on the side of the masses and back their correct views. And when the masses have incorrect views, they should likewise stand among them and persuade them. Only in this way will the masses be willing to listen to the union's views.

How Do Unions Handle Mass Disturbances?

Reporter: In industrial and mining enterprises, contradictions between the masses and the leadership sometimes develop into mass disturbances, and in some cases even strikes. When it encounters this situation, how should the union handle it? Some people think that because the union represents the masses, it should speak on their behalf; even if the views of the masses are incorrect, the union should represent their interests. Others hold the opposite opinion: they feel that the union should not participate in mass disturbances, and that it should only undertake to persuade the masses out of their incorrect opinions. Which of these views is correct?

Lai Ruoyu: Obviously the ideas of the masses are not always correct, or not entirely correct. With regard to the incorrect ideas of the masses, the union should persuade them of their errors. But the essence of the question is that the union cannot be separated from the masses. If the union loses contact with the masses, when it encounters the masses' incorrect ideas and needs to persuade them of their errors, the masses won't listen. Only if the union remains close to the masses will they be willing to listen to it and will its persuasive work be effective. We can see in this kind of situation that if the union is separated from the masses when there is a mass disturbance, the masses will abandon the union and establish their own autonomous organisations, with the result that the union cannot function. Thus, the principal task of the union lies in supporting the reasonable ideas of the masses; only after this aspect of the union's responsibilities has been fulfilled will it be possible to persuade the masses out of their incorrect ideas.

When we say that there may be incorrect ideas among the masses, we certainly cannot assume that all of the masses' opinions are incorrect, or that they are often incorrect. On the contrary, we must recognise that many of the masses' ideas are correct and reasonable. According to past statistics from many factories and mines, frequently over 60 percent of the ideas of the masses were related to various aspects of work, such as ideas about the organisation of labour, the use of raw materials, supply, production equipment, as well as systems of organisation and other matters. These views should be received with respect and supported. In political matters, the masses also usually have ideas and demands. These ideas and demands often involve the masses' democratic rights. If mass criticism of bureaucratism is met with retaliation, for instance, this is a violation of the masses' democratic rights, and the union should support the masses' demand that retaliation not occur. In matters of wages, benefits, recreation, and sports, the demands of the masses are often not excessive, and many of their ideas in these matters do not even involve the question of increases in wages and benefits, like their ideas about unhygienic canteens, poorly run nurseries and medical clinics, unreasonable wages, and so on. This also requires the support of the union. Demands concerning culture and technical training are the same. Most of these ideas are reasonable and correct, and the union should support them. This is the main point. Only by supporting the correct ideas of the masses will the union be considered to represent their interests. And it is only if you have the trust of the working masses that they will listen to you when situations develop.

As for the incorrect ideas of the masses, should the union also speak for the masses unconditionally? Obviously not. In a situation like this, the union should persuade. The question is not to persuade or not; the important question is how to persuade. The union should stand among the masses in order to persuade them. It should be recognised that even if there are incorrect opinions and excessive demands, there are reasons for this. That is, there is a reasonable aspect to them. Even if this reasonable aspect only comprises a small part, the union should in the first place recognise it, and moreover express sympathy. In that case, the union's persuasive efforts regarding the incorrect part can be accepted by the masses.

How should people be persuaded of the incorrectness of their ideas? It requires patient persuasion, not compulsion, and the method should be to stimulate the masses' own discussions and their own solutions. But

what should be done if there is still no solution even after these discussions and the masses still persist in their original ideas? In a situation like this, the union must not be separated from the masses. The union has a responsibility, on one hand, to put the masses' ideas forward to the relevant parties and, on the other hand, if the union still considers the masses' ideas to be incorrect, to continue to make its own attitude clear, to continue to attempt to persuade the masses. From the perspective of the union organisation, certainly the ideas of the majority of the masses may not always be correct, but democracy is one of the principles of the union, and the minority should submit to the majority. Here, union cadres can only continue to have their ideas and engage in the gradual work of persuasion. Only in this way can the union adhere to correct ideas while remaining close to the masses. Clearly, getting this point right is not easy, but it is also not impossible. We don't have a great deal of experience in this, but we do have some.

Can Union Work Be a Form of 'Contending'?

Reporter: Can 'letting a hundred schools of thought contend' be a part of union work?

Lai Ruoyu: Regardless of the organisation, there are two types of work that are different in nature. One is work of an executive nature, and the other is work of an investigative nature. With executive work, once the way of doing something is decided, then that is how it is done. Work of an investigative nature promotes free thought and free discussion. In this sense it, too, can also be called a form of 'contending'. But this is not the same as 'letting a hundred schools of thought contend' in the academic sphere, because it cannot form itself into a tendency of thought.

Contradictions Also Exist within Union Organisations

Reporter: Are there contradictions within union organisations? How should these contradictions be understood?

Lai Ruoyu: At present, the main question of union organisation is to clarify the position of the union in the correct handling of contradictions among the people. As for the internal organisation of the union, clearly there are contradictions, like there are in any other organisation. Within the union

there are questions concerning upper and lower levels, questions of the relations between the leadership and the rank and file, between various departments and levels, and so on. But these are questions internal to the union organisation, and these problems of daily work can be investigated without getting tangled up in the correct handling of contradictions among the people.

If the union is to play its proper role in the correct handling of contradictions among the people, the most important thing is the question of union democracy.

At Present, the Fundamental Question is the Promotion of Democracy

Lai Ruoyu: For unions, one of the fundamental questions at present is democracy. Only with democracy is it possible to show that the union is an organisation of the masses themselves. In order to be well adapted to the present situation, unions should resolve two major questions: the question of relations with management, and that of relations with the Party.

In terms of relations with management, in the past, unanimity was emphasised and the differences were not visible. Because of this, unions always stood with the leadership when situations arose, and they were unable to represent the ideas of the masses. This oversimplified approach to problems among the people often made unions hard and rigid in their methods of work, and they were unable to perform a regulatory role between the masses and the leadership. This is something that should be improved.

In terms of the relations with the Party, in the past, it was decided that unions must accept the leadership of the Party. This was correct, but insufficient attention was paid to the fact that, as a mass organisation, unions must also develop their own independent activities under the leadership of the Party's policies and ideology. Only by developing their own independent activities can they express their proper role.

In the past, we did not resolve these two problems well, and the role of union organisations was not fully brought into play. Because of this, the question of 'are unions even necessary' arose. The Central Committee and Chairman Mao have raised the question of the correct handling of contradictions among the people; union organisations should play their proper role better.