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Worker activists suffered disproportionately in the crackdown that followed the end of the democracy movement of 1989. While the ensuing years are generally considered a low point for the Chinese labour movement—at least until 1995, when the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, signalled a thaw for China’s civil society (see Howell’s essay in the present volume)—some activists kept up their attempts at organising workers even during such a challenging time. With ideals forged in the democracy movements of the 1970s and 1980s, these individuals engaged in a form of labour activism that was openly political, often in collaboration with various opposition forces that managed to reemerge from the ashes of 1989. Although most of the leaders of these groups came from an intellectual background, the possibility of them linking up with state-sector and migrant workers to form proto-trade unions was threatening enough for the Party-State to engage in harsh repression. This essay looks into some of these organisations, what they stood for, and what their ultimate demise meant for Chinese labour activism.

The Blocked Path: Political Labour Organising in the Aftermath of the Tiananmen Crackdown

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On 21 May 1995, Liu Nianchun found himself suddenly arrested without a warrant and disappeared from his family and friends after he presented a set of petitions to the National People's Congress (NPC). The police raided his home, confiscating letters, newspapers, magazines and photographs.¹ Liu's petitioning was part of a campaign by China's political dissidents to call for democratic reforms and rectification of human rights abuses. More than 100 other dissidents were also arrested in relation to the campaign, demonstrating a fierce determination by the authorities to stamp out any organised dissent.

Liu was neither naive about nor new to repression at the hands of the Party-State. A veteran democracy activist, he had been deeply rooted in the dissident milieu since the late 1970s, when he had taken part in the Democracy Wall Movement as a college student at the Beijing Normal Institute—a prestigious teaching college, from which he was later expelled due to his political activities.² In 1978, he became one of the editors of the prodemocracy literary journal *Today* (今天), along with the preeminent poets Bei Dao and Mang Ke. In 1981, his persistent activism landed him in jail for three years for 'counterrevolutionary propaganda and incitement' for his role in organising international support for his brother, Liu Qing, another veteran democracy activist, who would eventually spend fifteen years in jail. After being released, Liu went on undeterred and took part in the 1989 protests. Despite the harsher environment, he continued his political activism into the early 1990s, including joining the Peace Charter (和平宪章) movement with other political dissidents to demand the rehabilitation of the 1989 democracy movement and the release of political prisoners.

In all these activities, Liu was no different from many of his fellow political dissidents across China who had participated in earlier movements and remained engaged in political organising. However, Liu diverged in one aspect: his political vision included Chinese workers.

In 1994, amid his other activist projects, Liu and another activist named Wang Zhongqiu began preparation for the formation of the League for the Protection of the Rights of Working People (劳动者权利保障同盟, LPRWP), a civic organisation with a mission to protect workers' rights. Hoping to operate above ground and within the law, Liu applied for registration with the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Not taking kindly to this attempt, the authorities put him under 'home surveillance', only to release him without charge five months later.

Instead of staying put, Liu was soon back in prison—this time, for the 1995 petition campaign. On this occasion, his main 'crimes,' according to the Beijing Municipal Government criminal case document, were petitioning the NPC and Communist Party leadership and the attempt to create an illegal organisation—that is, the LPRWP. After more than a year in detention, in June 1996, he was sentenced to three years of 'reeducation through labour' and was sent to a facility in Heilongjiang Province, where he was allegedly tortured and his health deteriorated significantly.

Liu's name, and his short-lived organisation, the LPRWP, were not widely known at the time nor are they remembered today even among labour activists. But his activism—a mix of democratic opposition and an orientation towards labour organising—was indicative of a nascent political project that recognised the power of workers in social change and democratisation.

Emerging Political Labour Organising

The suppression of the 1989 democracy movement did not extinguish the hope for political reforms. The fact that hundreds of students, workers and intellectuals supportive of the movement were imprisoned, executed or exiled failed to deter some from opposition movements in the 1990s. Among them, a diverse group of people—many college graduates, educated professionals and some workers, who, like Liu, usually had a background in the democracy movements of the 1970s and 1980s but also developed an orientation towards workers in the 1990s—emerged as leaders of new labour-oriented groups.

This development can be understood as a form of political labour organising. The leaders recognised the plight of workers under China's market transitions, but also the importance of workers' political power in challenging state power. Their activities represented a conscious and strategic

project of organising workers around not only economic interests but also explicitly political demands. In many ways, this was a continuation of the short-lived Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation (北京工人自治联合会) that grew out of the 1989 Democracy Movement (see Zhang's essay in the present volume).³

These were not just isolated attempts but part of a proliferation of dissident groups and networks. In December 1991, the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* reported that Deng Xiaoping considered the birth of the Polish trade union Solidarity 'the single most important factor that led to the wholesale disintegration of communist regimes' in Eastern Europe (see also Wilson's essay in the present volume).⁴ This was in the context of the Ministry of State Security targeting fourteen underground labour organisations in Beijing, which had memberships ranging from twenty to 300 people, at least two of which had modelled themselves after Solidarity.⁵

A Comparison of Three Groups

The many similarities aside, the labour-oriented groups sat on a spectrum of political positions and approaches. An examination of three of the most prominent groups is instructive.

One of the more radical groups, identified as being closest to the political opposition movement, was the Free Labour Union of China (中国自由工会, FLUC). Formed in 1991, the FLUC focused on the deteriorating conditions of state-sector workers as market reforms undermined their welfare. Envisioning itself as 'a mass organisation formed out of the conscious efforts of Chinese workers', its stated goal was to fight for the economic rights and political freedom of workers.⁶

One of the leading founding members was Liu Jingsheng, a former worker at a state chemical plant on the outskirts of Beijing, who, despite his working-class background, had also been a democracy activist for more than a decade. He, too, was involved in the democracy movement of the late 1970s and was an editor of a movement journal called *Tansuo* (探索) along with Wei Jingsheng, the famed democracy activist of the Democracy Wall Movement. Liu was already on the authorities' radar, having been briefly arrested in 1979 and released after a few months. Besides the FLUC, he was also involved in forming a Beijing-based underground opposition group in early 1991. Another founder, Hu Shigen,

an academic at the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute, co-founded the China Liberal Democratic Party (中国自由民主党, CLDP) in 1992. The FLUC thus identified closely with the political opposition movement from which it emerged and with which its leadership overlapped.

After forming the FLUC, for three months between December 1991 and February 1992, Liu and other activists did make efforts to propagate their ideas, distributing pamphlets that advocated for autonomous trade unions among workers in Beijing. In a 1992 FLUC pamphlet that critiqued China's economic reforms, they contended that while the economic reforms raised the living standard of some people, the majority of the working class had not seen improvement but instead had their existing rights, such as social security, taken away from them.⁷ The authors pointed to examples where state workers now had to pay considerable sums out of their own pocket for medical expenses that before the reforms would have been covered by their work units. The focus of their critique was on the breaking of the 'iron rice bowl' (铁饭碗)—namely, the erosion of rights and declining living standards of state-sector workers. The pamphlet then went further to say that the Communist Party was no longer the party of the working class and had itself become the 'real master of society' while workers now were simply 'its servants'.

In June the same year, FLUC activists were detained for distributing leaflets about the 1989 democracy movement. In these documents, they expressed their belief that to fight for a fair and just society, it was necessary to have 'a democratic and sound legislative structure so that workers' rights and welfare can be improved'. To them, workers were 'a main force for the promotion of democracy in China'. Although these activists were detained, their reports were shared at the International Labour Conference held in Geneva in June 1992 with the help of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

Moving along the spectrum, Liu Nianchun's LPRWP was among the more moderate groups. Its stated intention in its charter was to serve only as an interest group that protected the interests of workers, peasants, intellectuals and entrepreneurs; it was not a political party nor an independent trade union, and it did not aim to challenge the rule of the Communist Party (a fact that was explicitly stated in the charter). Due to its positioning, Liu decided to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs in Beijing as an independent labour rights group. Before the arrests of its leading activists, including Liu Nianchun, by the Beijing Public Security Bureau in March 1993, it had a self-reported national membership of about 120 people.⁸

Some of the proposals the LPRWP submitted to the National People's Congress in March 1993 provide a useful understanding of the group's analysis and agenda.⁹ The document started by emphasising the organisation's twin goals: protecting the rights and interests of working people, and rooting out corruption. The first proposal argued for the restoration of the right to strike, which was removed from the Chinese Constitution of 1982. As China was undergoing 'a difficult process of evolving from a planned economy to a market economy,' the authors wrote, 'confronted with capitalist owners and their managers, workers and employees can only protect their own interests by invoking the specific rights of citizens bestowed on them by the law.' They went on to say that 'absolute power corrupts absolutely' and 'unrestrained wealth will also deteriorate into a source of social injustice.' For these reasons, they believed the right to strike was crucial for preventing 'the unjust use of wealth'.

The document included several other proposals. It demanded that government officials and Communist Party leaders report on their personal property and advocated for the establishment of unions for agricultural workers. It then tackled the rights of 'peasant workers' (农民工), who at the time were often overlooked, as attention was largely focused on state workers. Recognising peasants' contributions to China's economic development and their arduous working conditions, the LPRWP called for the NPC to investigate labour conditions and legislate to protect their rights. Finally, the authors contended that with more foreign-owned enterprises, private enterprises and joint ventures setting up shop in China, unions were either absent or not playing their role. Therefore, they suggested the congress come up with laws so that workers could unionise in these new enterprises. While the proposals fell short of calling for independent trade unionism as FLUC did, the LPRWP offered a more grounded analysis and practical direction for workers' struggles.

The group that was least grandiose in name but arguably came the closest to serious labour organising was the Federation of Hired-Hand Workers (打工者联合会). While references to the organisation at the time translated its name as 'hired-hand workers', the original Chinese refers to what we would simply call 'migrant workers'. The choice of the phrase was not accidental and reflected their deliberate focus on rural migrant workers in southern China.

One of the leaders was Li Wenming. After graduating from a technical school in Hunan Province, Li moved to Shenzhen in 1991, when he was in his late twenties. Following a few odd temporary jobs, Li secured a

position as a reporter at the newspaper *Shenzhen Youth* (深圳青年). Li and his colleagues, some of whom participated in the 1989 democracy movement, were appalled by the conditions of rural migrant workers and believed the only solution was political education and independent trade unionism. For these purposes, Li and his colleagues set up an evening school for rural migrant workers and established the Federation of Hired-Hand Workers. They also published a bulletin called *Workers Forum* (打工广场) for distribution to workers. Supported initially by the local municipal Party leadership and the city trade union, Li was in charge of a Shenzhen Government program to disseminate knowledge about the Labour Law among rural migrant workers.¹⁰

The bulletin had a specific focus on rural migrant workers in Shenzhen. It discussed basic issues that we now take for granted, such as working conditions, wages, overtime and safety, but also more sensitive matters like trade unionism and workers' struggles. This was a distinct step towards understanding migrant labour and the potential for its empowerment. The first issue of the bulletin criticised the government for permitting the Zhili factory to continue operating despite it not meeting the safety standards before its deadly fire (see Anita Chan's essay on 1993 in the present volume).¹¹ It argued that only through struggle and solidarity could workers best protect their rights and safety.

A particularly striking article in *Workers Forum* posed the poignant question: Why must we unite?¹² It painted Shenzhen as a city of two worlds: the world of 'tall skyscrapers, highly developed commercial compounds and merchants busy making money' and the world of 'the real masters of Shenzhen, the millions of workers' with their 'oppressive working conditions, overtime work, and meagre wages.' Adopting a militant tone, the article argued that 'rights can never be bestowed on us, they depend on our own struggle' and 'if they are given to us, they can be easily taken away.' It concluded that 'only those [rights] obtained through our struggle can rest securely in our hands.' But previous struggles had been isolated efforts, and what was needed was unity. To those who feared repression, the authors argued that unity would bring strength, and they would not lose their jobs but feel safer and have more job opportunities. Finally, to avoid tragedies like the horrific Zhili fire of 1993, they believed it was critical to have 'our own strong trade union.'

While their messages tended to focus more on working conditions than on political opposition as such, their language of workers' struggles and working-class unity could be equally, if not more, threatening from

the point of view of the Party-State. Furthermore, the leaders' networks and entanglement with the broad political opposition movement put them out of favour with the authorities. In 1994, the Shenzhen Public Security Bureau detained Li Wenming and Guo Baosheng for attempting to form an independent trade union. It would take the authorities until 1997 to sentence them to three and a half years for 'counterrevolutionary propaganda and incitement'.

The Blocked Path

All of the groups discussed above can be seen as a continuation of the democratic political movements in which the groups' leaders were embedded in the previous decades. Their analyses and demands reflected their preoccupation with democratic aspirations. Some maintained even more direct connections with attempts to form independent political groups and parties to challenge the government taking place in the same period. It should come as no surprise that many of these organisations were founded and operated in Beijing—an indication of the political nature of their organising and of the fact they were aimed at other dissidents as their constituencies and took the state as their target. Whatever the intention of the individual groups, most maintained an underground or semi-underground presence, with no prospect of operating openly and legally.

These groups were primarily led by intellectual dissidents and did not have a solid working-class base—a situation that went against their ambitions to build strong national organisations and movements. In their brief existence, no labour action was organised or concretely supported by the three groups discussed, and there was no evidence of these groups having rooted themselves in labour organising at the workplace level. This, however, was already a step further along from the democracy movement of 1989, when workers were excluded from the centre and leadership of the movement despite their wide participation. But without working-class membership, these groups were speaking in the name of workers rather than constituting mass working-class organisations or trade unions. It is hard not to see the risk of instrumentalising the working class and subordinating them to their political projects.

However, a minority of these groups did try to address directly the conditions of workers and raise grievances the workers would have endorsed. The erosion of workers' living standards and welfare entitlements that

deepened and accelerated from the early 1990s, as well as the massive rural labour migration in the same period, were fertile ground for these groups' messages of rights protection. Although the 1980s and early 1990s did not see many large-scale worker mobilisations, this was the dawn of a new period of worker organising, including a series of industrial actions in 1993 and 1994.¹³ Unfortunately, all of these attempts ended prematurely before they could develop further. The leaders and key participants in these groups were rounded up within a year or two, and many were handed harsh sentences. The possibility of intellectual dissidents and groups set up as proto-trade unions linking up with state-sector or migrant workers posed enough of a threat to the authorities to trigger harsh suppression.

By remembering this now largely forgotten episode, we see a glimpse of attempts at labour organising different from those that came after. By the mid to late 1990s, as the hope of any explicit political project was extinguished, the demands of rural migrant workers for social protection gave rise to largely non-political projects of mutual aid, legal protection and bargaining over economic benefits without a link to any political vision. Independent trade unionism remained an absolute taboo, but a new door was opened for legal rights-based civil society organisations that sprang up to support migrant workers (see Howell's essay in the present volume). Because of the near total suppression, there was an all but complete rupture between these early attempts at political labour organising and the later emergence of labour nongovernmental organisations in the 2000s and 2010s.

Had they been given the time to develop, would these labour-oriented groups have helped bring about mass labour and trade union organisations? They might have found a receptive constituency. The following two decades first witnessed state workers' resistance to state-owned enterprise privatisation and layoffs, and then the larger-scale mobilisation of rural migrant workers for better pay and conditions. The labour-oriented groups of the early 1990s could have acted as an organisational base and a political program for these movements to develop into more organised, national movements. Yet, it is just as likely that workers would find the intellectual dissidents untrustworthy and too risky to be associated with. What is certain is that just the prospect of such a path—namely, the political organising of Chinese workers in independent trade unions as part of, or in alliance with, a democracy movement—was so threatening for the Party-State that it could not be allowed to exist. Consequently, in the

next two decades, it became ever more difficult—even against a trend of increasing workers' struggles—for an organised labour movement to emerge and take political or mass organised forms in China.