

UNDERSTANDING CHINA AND ITS UNIONS¹

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Abstract: There is much confusion in the world workers' movement about unions in China, and even more confusion about the class character of the Chinese state. This article compares a state that arises from a socialist revolution, such as the Chinese state after 1949, to a "labor union risen to state power." Trade unions in such states are like a "subcommittee" of this union-in-state-power, with the important responsibility of defending workers' interests in the workplace. But the new state also faces many other important tasks, including assuring food supply, economic development, equality for women, nationalities, and youth, environmental and other necessary tasks. The article argues for developing the relative separation and effectiveness of the "subcommittees" which are addressing each of those necessary tasks—and simultaneously developing periodic "harmonizing mechanisms" (ranging from conferences to legislative meetings) in order to achieve balance between those necessary tasks. Such balance is required because even states formed by a socialist revolution must make "the best out of a bad situation," just like labor unions in capitalist countries.

Key words: class character of the Chinese state; labor unions after a socialist revolution; relative separation and harmonizing mechanisms; making the best out a bad situation

In April 2010, AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka spoke at Harvard University. A coal mine explosion in West Virginia a few hours before his talk had left 29 miners missing and feared dead. Their fate weighed heavily on him.

I asked Brother Trumka if he would support mine-safety cooperation between US and Chinese unions. His answer was positive. He cited health-and-safety cooperation with mining unions in other countries, such as South Africa. The emphasis was in the right places. Then he added: "But [unions in China] are not real unions."

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Unions do differ in some ways in China, Vietnam and Cuba, compared to unions in capitalist countries. But how? Indeed—What is China itself?

This was the question posed to me by a worker-intellectual, founder of a labor research center, shortly before his first trip to China in April 2008. “I don’t know what China is,” he said to me. “Is it capitalist? Is it socialist?” His uncertainty mirrors widespread confusion about China in the world workers’ movement.

This worker-intellectual came from a family of Teamsters, the union of truck drivers; he had once been a fuel truck driver himself. One of the things I really liked about him was that when he referred to the Teamsters, it was without a snicker, even though he was conscious of the Teamsters’ shortcomings. He understood that it was, above all, a union, a workers’ organization, facing huge obstacles and challenges in the face of capitalist hostility.

I said to him, “China is as if the Teamsters had risen to state power atop a great upsurge that broke the old ruling class’s power.” He smiled. I think he understood.

Unions in China Are Like “Subcommittees” of Unions in Capitalist Countries

China is like a union risen to state power, a special form of workers’ organization, with a government and army. This workers’ organization in power must now address not only defense of workers’ interests in the workplace—the traditional task of unions—but a thousand other necessary tasks as well: food supply, economic development, education, equality for women and national minorities, environment, public health, and other tasks. And it must find a balance between them, under conditions where it must make the best out of a bad situation. If it seriously fails at any of these tasks, it risks being busted or “decertified”—a term used in the US when workers actively or passively drive out a union that had until now represented them. Decertification leaves workers without protection against the exploiters. The same thing happened to workers in the Soviet Union after 1991.

Complicating matters in a “union in state power,” China included, is that workers generally form a minority of the “membership.” Workers are the state’s social base, but a majority of the residents are not workers—they are peasants, self-employed, youth, managers, intermediate layers, officials, plus a small but significant minority of exploiters, owners of private businesses, small and large.

China’s labor unions are like a very important *subcommittee* of the union in state power, with two very important responsibilities: to defend workers’ interests in the workplace, and to shape overall state policy. More on that shortly.

First, let’s apply this analogy to unions in capitalist countries. The Teamsters, for example, may have several subcommittees that address necessary tasks, such

as organizing, safety-and-health, and civil rights (to achieve equality for African American or women workers).

The safety-and-health subcommittee may find that certain practices or chemicals threaten workers' health and should be discontinued. Yet, discontinuing those practices could also lead to unemployment for many African American workers, who are routinely assigned the most dangerous work by the bosses. A potential contradiction thus exists between the union's safety-and-health and civil rights subcommittees. The organizing department, another subcommittee, may require so many resources that it leaves little for safety and health or civil rights tasks. How such contradictions are resolved requires harmonizing mechanisms between the subcommittees, and ultimately will reflect the general level of labor organization, consciousness and power.

Continuing with this analogy: In order to be effective, each subcommittee of a union needs some independence from other subcommittees as well as from the overall leadership. Without that relative independence, it is difficult for subcommittees to be effective. But without the harmonizing mechanisms, it can be very difficult for the union to balance between its many tasks.

A union in state power that champions economic growth at the expense of defending workers in the workplace will weaken its social base. But poverty will distort and can compromise the state's entire structure. So will continued social inequality or environmental destruction. This is why periodic harmonizing mechanisms are also necessary for the union in state power. It needs to reconcile the priorities of the various subcommittees and develop the state's overall policy and decision-making.

Even "unions risen to state power" must make the best of a bad situation. While they have much greater resources than unions in capitalist countries, they do not have unlimited power. They face the exploiters' hostility and anarchic economy at every turn.

Both kinds of unions, whether in power or under capitalist rule, must therefore balance between many necessary tasks—which is no small feat. A leadership that is unable to reconcile contradictions between subcommittees may place them under its discipline, or even abolish them. But then the necessary tasks of the subcommittees are unlikely to be carried out well, if at all, and the appropriate balance between tasks will not be reached.

Labor unions in China are like a subcommittee of the "union risen to state power." Their very important responsibility is to defend workers' interests in the workplace—and to participate in shaping overall state policy. Thus, unions' responsibilities in China include not only addressing wages, benefits and working conditions but also having a voice in over-all tasks, such as environmental policy or setting prices, to give just two examples.

The government of a union risen to state power is not the same thing as the state. The government is best understood as one of the state's "subcommittees" addressing two vital tasks, organizing economic development and defense against exploiters' inevitable attempts to bust the union. The state, on the other hand, is the sum total of all the "subcommittees," including government and labor unions, that are addressing necessary tasks, *and* the harmonizing mechanisms required to develop overall policies.

Ideally, each of the necessary subcommittees of the "union risen to state power" should be relatively independent, effective and strong in its own right. Also ideally, the periodic harmonizing mechanisms must be developed to balance the contradictions between the subcommittees. Achieving both is very difficult, yet it is ultimately essential. The Soviet Union was unable to resolve this balance, and fell to counter-revolution 74 years after it was formed. What happened to the Soviet labor unions after Yeltsin seized the government offices in Moscow and began to attack workers?

A general principle applies: a workers' organization and its sub-organizations will be as effective as the corresponding interest and control from below, and the coordination and harmonization from above. This requires worker empowerment and education, internal democracy, and prompt and effective two-way flows of information in order to arrive at decisions.

Much to Come Together

In summary, the relationship between the Chinese state and its labor unions is like the relationship between a union in a capitalist country and one of its subcommittees. There will be many uncomfortable moments in the process of reconciling contradictions between union subcommittees (tasks). Why? Because the resolution of differences between the tasks of subcommittees is not obvious. But as long as the subcommittees remain committed to the union's overall interests and power, productive solutions will be found while serious errors will be avoided and lesser errors corrected.

A surprising conclusion from this analysis is that strong subcommittees of a union—or union in state power—can actually weaken the union. How? The overall structure can be weakened if the harmonizing mechanisms have not been developed. A strong and effective safety-and-health subcommittee is very desirable in a unionized factory. But if that strength is achieved at the cost of other tasks, such as those of the civil rights (equality) or organizing subcommittees, the whole union can be weakened. The same is true for a union in state power. In turn, the leadership can weaken a union if it fails to develop and use the harmonizing mechanisms.

Much then has to come together to strengthen labor's organizations, whether in state power or under capitalist rule. All this while working to overcome capitalism's limitations and forced "competition" among workers, limitations that constantly require our organizations to make the best out of a bad situation.

Why Are Chinese Workers' Standards of Living Rising without Effective Unions?

One way to see this analogy between unions and unions-in-state-power is as follows: In capitalist countries, safety and health protections for workers in unionized factories tend to be stronger than in non-union factories. This is true even when the unionized factories lack effective safety-and-health subcommittees. How could that be? Because there is a union in the factory.

In China, the education and standard of living of workers has risen even though unions have not been particularly effective (although they are becoming stronger). How could this be? Because the Chinese state itself is a "union risen to state power."

Effective labor unions can strengthen the Chinese and similar "unions in state power," such as Vietnam, Cuba, and People's Korea; the critical requirement is that for effective balancing mechanisms to harmonize the unions' tasks with those of other necessary "subcommittees," including the government (economic development and defense). Similarly, an effective safety-and-health subcommittee will strengthen a labor union, provided the union also has the mechanisms to balance the union's many challenges.

Exploiters' Antagonism to China Is Like Their Antagonism to Unions

In 2009, the capitalist media repeatedly broadcast the false claim that the bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler was due to auto unions' "greed" and "Cadillac health plans." No mention was made of the massive overcapacity in the industry, or the general crisis of capitalism. The exploiters' state then acted to greatly weaken unions and cheapen labor. The action was backed by the courts, police and prisons. Today, the capitalist media are making the equally bogus claim that postal worker unions' "greed" and "plush pensions" are bankrupting the US Postal Service, and public workers' unions are similarly bankrupting local governments. These false claims are then used to attack the unions, cut wages and plunder union pension plans.

How many times have the capitalist media also claimed that China is behind the loss of jobs in the US, that China is trying to poison our children, or that its "currency manipulation" is bankrupting the US?

The exploiters' antagonism to China is like their antagonism to unions here, a class antagonism. It reflects the fear and hatred of the exploiters towards organization of the exploited.

China is a special form of labor organization, a “union risen to state power.” It is in world labor’s interest to defend China and similar states—and their unions—against the exploiters’ attacks, just as it is in our interest to defend the Teamsters and other unions.

It is in labor’s interest to develop cooperation among all of our class’s organizations, in power or not, flaws and all, to enable humanity to overcome capitalism’s cruel and deepening limitations.

Notes

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2. Eric Brooks, Bonnie Weiss and Maja Weisl of the Communist Party USA, and Dave Campbell and Mike Zielinski of the United Steel Workers all contributed to this article, along with Al Sargis and the Boston China Study Group. This article is dedicated to Maja Weisl, who died shortly after commenting on it.

