

Activism on the rise in ‘world’s workshop’

[HTTP://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/NEWS/2015/05/28/BUSINESS/ACTIVISM-RISE-WORLDS-WORKSHOP/#.VJE9INKRTIV](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/05/28/business/activism-rise-worlds-workshop/#.VJE9INKRTIV)

PANYU, CHINA – As workers gathered around a table in a cheap restaurant to discuss strike action against their shoe factory bosses, Chinese police barged in and dragged away their leaders.

More than 2,000 employees at the plant — which counts foreign brands including Coach among its customers, according to workers — had downed tools, camping out on brightly colored mats to demand unpaid benefits.

“They burst through the door and told us not to move,” a female worker told AFP. Several said police had beaten them, and one woman wore a large bandage covering injuries on her back.

The organizers were held for less than a day, but the walkout by the whole staff last month paralyzed production — and weeks later the workers claimed victory.

Once renowned for their cheap wages and docility, the protest at the Taiwanese-owned plant is an example of how employees in the workshop of the world are increasingly standing up for greater benefits.

“Ten years ago we didn’t have any conception of the law or defending our rights,” said a male worker, who like others asked not to be named for fear of reprisals.

Low-cost labor has been key to China’s decades-long economic boom, and the newfound activism has authorities worried.

The gray Lide facility in Panyu city is one of tens of thousands of factories in the southern province of Guangdong producing everything from denim jeans to smartphones.

Finance minister Lou Jiwei last month warned that China risks falling into a “middle income trap” if high wages make manufacturing less profitable before the country can shift to less labor-intensive, more value-added industries.

He called legislation promoting bargaining between workers and employees “scary,” and blamed excessive “union power” for the multiple bankruptcies in the U.S. auto industry.

There were 1,379 protests by workers in China last year, more than tripling in just three years, according to data from the Hong Kong-based China Labour Bulletin (CLB).

That included China's biggest strike in decades, when tens of thousands of employees at Yue Yuen, another Guangdong factory that makes shoes for Nike and Adidas, won concessions despite worker arrests.

The Communist Party fears an independent labor movement, and only allows one government-linked trade union federation — that claimed 290 million members at the end of 2013 — which tends to side with employers.

But campaigners say employees have been empowered by a labor shortage and recent laws giving them greater rights.

“They are not only aware of their rights but understand that they are part of the working class, a class that increasingly has the strength and ability to forge its own destiny,” CLB said.



Women in a newly built shoe factory in Taiwan. Most clothing and shoes are made in factories in East Asia and South America. These women will be on their feet all day and only get one day off a week.

New Addition: In Jan, 2016 China passed a law setting the maximum number of working hours at 40 per week and a mandatory two days off every week

Source:

<http://www.chinapost.com.tw/taiwan/national/national-news/2015/05/16/436156/Two-days.htm>



Currently the cheap clothing in most stores across the world is made by workers who are overworked and underpaid. There have been numerous occasions where unsafe working conditions have lead to the death of those workers.

Source: <http://www.cagle.com/tag/sweatshop/>