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regime started to "go west" with development projects that aimed at establishing industrialized centers throughout inland provinces. Rebalancing efforts were intensified after the crisis began in the late 2000s, including attempts to lessen the economic dependence on (public) investment and exports and to deal with the unequal development of urban and rural, as well as eastern and central, regions. This went hand in hand with new

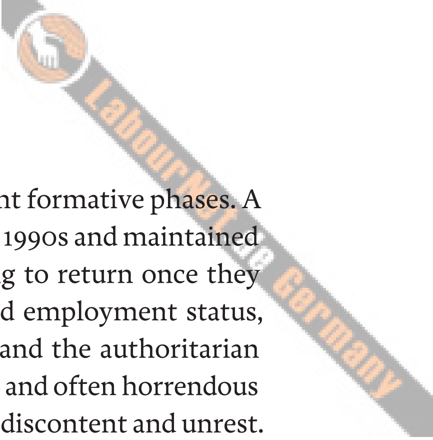
Ralf Ruckus: The Communist Road to Capitalism. How Social Unrest and Containment Have Pushed China's (R)evolution since 1949 (Oakland: PM Press, 2021); extract from chapter 4, part 3, pages 137–144

... ge areas in the center and the west ... d labor shortages on the east coast. ... mically upgrade, i.e., to introduce ... ation, and exchange of low-value ... t would guarantee a higher propor- ... n the country. Seeing a chance to ... vate and state enterprises adhered ... es.[55] All of this had a major impact on the conditions and struggles of migrant workers, who had provided the labor used to build the PRC's "economic miracle" in the first place.

3 STRIKES: MIGRANT STRUGGLES AND THE END OF "CHEAP" LABOR, 2003–2012

The PRC's economic boom since the 1990s is based on the exploitation of "cheap" migrant labor, and the CCP regime repeatedly changed its migration policies to guarantee its supply. The first wave of migrant workers learned how to deal with life in the city and the new labor regime and, by the early 2000s, had begun to organize more struggles to improve working and living conditions. Throughout the 2000s, the steady growth in the number of migrant workers continued, and most of them were eager to stay in the city permanently. Their struggles culminated in a strike wave in 2010.

55 On relocation, automation, and upgrading, see Huang Yu and Naubahar Sharif, "From 'Labour Dividend' to 'Robot Dividend': Technological Change and Workers' Power in South China," *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 6, no. 1 (April 2017): 1–26, accessed January 28, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/y4atjrhq; Florian Butollo, *The End of Cheap Labour: Industrial Transformation and "Social Upgrading" in China* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2014); Ralf Ruckus, "Rezension: Florian Butollo, The End of Cheap Labour? Industrial Transformation and 'Social Upgrading' in China," *Sozial.Geschichte Online* 17 (2015): 135–48, accessed November 7, 2020. https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/duepublico_derivate_00042080/05_Ruckus_Li_Minqi.pdf.



The Early Protests

The PRC's migrant workers went through different formative phases. A first generation entered the cities in the 1980s and 1990s and maintained close relations with their home villages, planning to return once they earned enough money. Their precarious legal and employment status, bad working conditions, arbitrary management and the authoritarian labor regime, the sexist and racist division of labor, and often horrendous living conditions in the dormitories led to worker discontent and unrest. For instance, in the Pearl River Delta, one of the main areas for foreign investment in consumer goods industries, strikes in new industrial zones had already begun back in the 1980s.[56] In 1993 and 1994, a first wave of unrest hit the region, and especially the industrial cities Zhuhai and Shenzhen. Migrant workers staged walkouts, sit-ins, and demonstrations demanding wage increases and better living conditions.[57] This early migrant worker unrest, along with the SOE workers' discontent, was not only answered with repression. Out of fear of destabilization, the CCP regime also started to regulate labor issues, define workers' legal rights, and set minimum standards, with a range of laws such as the Union Law (1992), the Labor Law (1995), and the Arbitration Law (1995). Yet, in the 1990s and 2000s, these laws, as well as other regulations on workers' rights concerning wages, working conditions, health and safety issues, and social insurances, were largely ignored by enterprises employing migrant workers and barely enforced by the state.

New Migration Patterns

The exploitation of migrant workers who moved from rural to urban areas was already an important economic factor in both the socialist and the transition periods, and it has continued to play a crucial role since. During the last phase of the transition process under CCP leader Jiang Zemin in the 1990s, the massive industrial expansion did offer the PRC's rural population new opportunities to migrate and improve their living

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56 Chris Chan King-Chi, "The Challenge of Labour in China: Strikes and the Changing Labour Regime in Global Factories" (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2008), 99–100, accessed October 20, 2020, http://web.warwick.ac.uk/russia/ngpa/Chanthesis.pdf.

57 Ibid., 108–14; also see Qin Ling, "Introduction: The Survival and Collective Struggles of Workers in China's Coastal Private Enterprises Since the 1990s," in Hao Ren, eds., *China on Strike: Narratives of Workers' Resistance*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 6–7.

conditions, but only at the cost of a precarious proletarian life at the bottom of society. A reform of the hukou opened up more opportunities for rural migrants to move to cities, and deportations (or so-called repatriations) were reduced.[58] Throughout the 2000s, the total working population grew by an average of ten million a year to reach 779 million in 2009.[59] The largest and fastest growing group was that of migrant workers, who accounted "for nearly 80 percent of the total labor force in construction, mining and quarrying industries, 68 percent in manufacturing industries, and over 50 percent in service sectors" in the late 2000s.[60] According to Kathy Walker, "[by] 2003, [the 'floating population'] had swelled to 150 million and included many of the tens of millions of peasants who had lost their land through illegal or under-compensated seizures."[61] In 2009, the absolute number of migrant workers was estimated at around 230 million.[62] Approximately 70 percent of them were "employed in China's eastern areas with two thirds of them working in large or medium cities and half of them moving between different provinces."[63] The influx of migrants also accounts for the rising urbanization rate, which increased from 19.4 percent in 1980 to 43 percent in 2005, 50 percent in 2010, and 60.6 in 2019.[64]

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58 In the 2000s, the hukou practices of different regions changed, with big cities enforcing it and some provinces and smaller cities not enforcing it or only enforcing it partially.

59 "In 2009, 297 million worked in agriculture. . . . 216 million worked in the secondary sector, three quarters in manufacturing and another big part in construction. The tertiary sector employed 266 million. By the mid-1990s, it was bigger that the secondary sector"; Ten Brink, *Chinas Kapitalismus*, 284 (translated by R.R.).

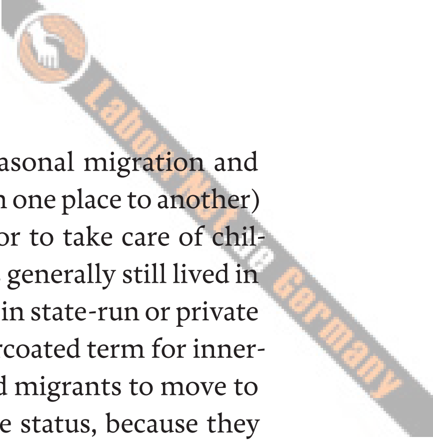
60 Leung Pak-Nang and Pun Ngai, "The Radicalisation of the New Chinese Working Class: A Case Study of Collective Action in the Gemstone Industry," *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2009): 552, accessed January 26, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/yxrqn2zo.

61 Walker, "From Covert to Overt," 466.

62 "Labour Migration in China and Mongolia," International Labour Organization, accessed October 20, 2020, https://www.ilo.org/beijing/areas-of-work/labour-migration/lang--en/index.htm.

63 Ibid.

64 "Degree of Urbanization in China from 1980 to 2019," statista.com, September 10, 2020, accessed November 8, 2020 https://www.statista.com/statistics/270162/urbanization-in-china. For an examination of urbanization processes in the PRC, see Zhang Mei, *China's Poor Regions: Rural-Urban Migration, Poverty, Economic Reform, and Urbanization* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Zhu Yu, "China's Floating Population and Their Settlement Intention in the Cities: Beyond the *Hukou* Reform," *Habitat International* 31, no. 1 (March 2007): 65–76; Shahid Yusuf and Tony Saich,



Migration patterns varied, ranging from seasonal migration and circular migration (back and forth or moving from one place to another) to return migration (of women* to bear a child or to take care of children when they begin school).[65] Migrant workers generally still lived in temporary housing in cramped conditions, either in state-run or private dormitories or in urban migrant villages—a sugarcoated term for inner-city and suburban slums. The hukou laws allowed migrants to move to the cities but kept them in a precarious residence status, because they were not allowed to permanently settle there. They were discriminated against by city regulations that excluded them from access to certain urban welfare programs and infrastructure, and they were attacked as "outsiders" and "backward" hillbillies by people with urban hukou.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the supply of migrant labor for SEZs and urban centers in eastern provinces dried up for various reasons. First, population growth had slowed down because of the One-Child Policy, and rising incomes and urbanization had led to lower birthrates. The effects were felt in the late 2000s, as fewer young people, including rural migrants, entered the labor market. Second, two decades of massive rural-urban migration caused a decline of the labor surplus in the countryside, i.e., less rural labor was available for migration. Third, the relocation of industries to central and western provinces meant that migrants found jobs closer to their home villages and no longer needed to move to the industrial centers on the east coast. All of this created repeated labor shortages—i.e., not enough people were willing to accept the low-wage jobs available in several regions along the east coast. These labor shortages and the continuing labor struggles pushed up wages and unit labor costs. The PRC's "cheap labor model" was in danger.

The Second Generation and the Strike Wave of 2010

Most of the migrants who entered the cities in the 2000s did not plan to ever return to the countryside to engage in farming. They had learned from the experience of their parents, older siblings, and friends in the

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eds., *China Urbanizes: Consequences, Strategies, and Policies* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2008).

65 Cindy C. Fan, *China on the Move: Migration, the State, and the Household* (London: Routledge, 2008), 124; also see Rachel Murphy, *How Migrant Labor Is Changing Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 25.

labournet germany

cities, and they increasingly organized.[66] After 2003, the number of migrant workers' struggles started to rise significantly.[67] At first, most protests were mainly defensive actions against wage arrears, low wages, and bad working conditions. They often took the form of so-called cellular activism—short protests limited to one workplace.[68] Strikes were extralegal, but workers organized wildcats and generally developed a sense for what kind of resistance they could get away with. While in earlier cases, kinship networks of migrants from a certain region played a role in the unrest, in the mid- and late 2000s migrants also formed more interest-based bonds during confrontations with managements and the state. Meanwhile, the state repression of open class debates and organizations led to a kind of workers' dyslexia—the lack of a language to express demands in a class-based form.[69]

Starting in the second half of the 2000s, the migrant workers' struggles voiced demands for improvements: higher wages, better working conditions, and more respect from managers and employers. Workers used their "increased leverage" and enhanced marketplace and workplace bargaining power, which drew upon the regional labor shortages, experiences in workplace stoppages, and new labor laws.[70] In 2010, the slump in exports and employment and the pressure on wages in the wake of the global crisis fueled the most spectacular labor unrest of migrant workers to date. In the summer of that year, a strike wave spread from a Honda auto supplier plant in Foshan, Guangdong, to other auto companies and sectors in the province and other parts of the

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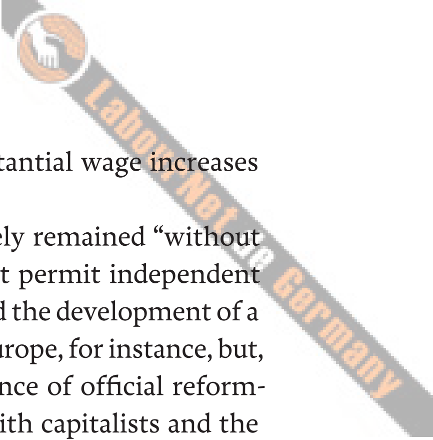
66 On the generational change, see Zhu Yu, "China's Floating Population and Their Settlement Intention in the Cities"; Zhu Yu and Chen Wenzhe, "The Settlement Intention of China's Floating Population in the Cities: Recent Changes and Multifaceted Individual-Level Determinants," *Population, Space and Place* 16, no. 4 (July–August 2010): 253–67.

67 Jay Chen Chih-Jou, "Growing Social Unrest and Emergent Protest Groups in China," in Michael Hsiao Hsin-Huang and Lin Cheng-Yi, eds., *Rise of China: Beijing's Strategies and Implications for the Asia-Pacific* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 96f.

68 Lee, *Against the Law*, x.

69 Pun Ngai and Chris Chan King-Chi, "The Subsumption of Class Discourse in China," *boundary 2* 35, no. 2 (June 2008): 75–91.

70 Chan King-Chi, "The Challenge of Labour in China," 368; Manfred Elfstrom and Sarosh Kuruvilla, "The Changing Nature of Labor Unrest in China," *ILR Review* 67, no 2 (April 2014): 454, accessed January 27, 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/286013739_The_Changing_Nature_of_Labor_Unrest_in_China.



country.[71] The strike wave pushed through substantial wage increases for migrant workers.[72]

All in all, the migrant worker struggles largely remained "without class organizations,"[73] as the CCP regime did not permit independent labor organizations. This restriction has hampered the development of a workers' movement similar to those in Western Europe, for instance, but, at the same time has also prevented the emergence of official reformist labor representatives who negotiate "deals" with capitalists and the regime and make sure worker struggles remain within predetermined channels of collective bargaining. While sections of the migrant workforce in factories and on construction sites successfully widened the space for wildcat strikes and other workplace actions in the PRC, other migrant proletarians with less workplace bargaining power had to use different means and public spaces to express their anger and desires. Riots frequently broke out in different parts of the country, large-scale social outbursts that sometimes involved thousands of people. Often, they were triggered by arbitrary or aggressive behavior on the part of state officials, local police, local citizens, and wealthy people toward migrants, peasants, and the urban poor.[74]

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71 On the Honda strike, the strike wave, the mobilization of migrant workers, and the dubious role of the ACFTU in containing the unrest, see Eli Friedman, *Insurgency Trap: Labor Politics in Postsocialist China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 140ff.; Florian Butollo and Tobias ten Brink, "Challenging the Automization of Discontent," *Critical Asian Studies* 44, no. 3 (2012): 419–40, accessed January 27, 2021, https://www.mpifg.de/pu/mpifg_ja/CAS_44_2012_tenBrink.pdf; Friends of Gongchao, "'Sie haben das selbst organisiert'—Die Streikwelle von Mai bis Juli 2010 in China," in Pun Ngai, Ching-Kwan Lee et al., *Aufbruch der zweiten Generation. Wanderarbeit, Gender und Klassenzusammensetzung in China* (Berlin: Assoziation A, 2010), 225–57, accessed October 20, 2020, https://tinyurl.com/yyq3y4lg; Lance Carter, "Auto Industry Strikes in China," *Insurgent Notes*, October 28, 2010, accessed October 20, 2020, http://insurgentnotes.com/2010/10/auto-industry-strikes-in-china.

72 According to a Reuters report, "The average monthly wage of China's 158 million migrant workers in 2011 surged 21.2 percent from 2010 to 2,049 yuan. In the five-year period from 2006 to 2010, the average minimum wage in China increased 12.5 percent per year"; "China Sets Target of Average 13 Percent Annual Minimum Wage Rise," Reuters, February 8, 2012, accessed January 7, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-economy-jobs-idUSTRE8170DY20120208.

73 Chris Chan King-Chi, "Contesting Class Organization: Migrant Workers' Strikes in China's Pearl River Delta, 1978–2010," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 83 (Spring 2013): 132, accessed January 27, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/yyjces8z.

74 An example is the riot in Zengcheng, Guangdong, in June 2011, when migrant worker protesters started "torching government buildings, smashing police

While migrant workers increasingly identified capitalists as exploiters and the (local) state as their accomplice and were able to organize everyday struggles and occasional large-scale protests, "Capital's capacity to relocate and outsource production . . . weakened [their] market, workplace, and associational power."[75] They also continued to be separated along lines of age, gender, region, and the type of enterprise, and the rural-urban divide still played a role, separating migrant workers from urban workers. In addition, the CCP regime's conflict regulation mechanisms and repression worked to prevent a large tsunami of protests. Yet these countermeasures have failed to prevent frequent labor protests.

Migrant Women*'s Everyday Struggles

In the 1980s, more men* migrated from the villages to the cities, but over time the proportion of women* increased substantially.[76] Most of these women* migrants were young, in their late teens or twenties. One reason for them to migrate was—as for all migrants—to find better job opportunities, but many also migrated to escape the patriarchal village structures and to have more control over their lives.[77] However, in the cities, women* were faced with the gendered division of labor, and most only found low-paid manufacturing or service jobs. Millions worked as domestic workers in urban households, in other care jobs, or in the sex industry. Migrant women* were also discriminated against and denigrated for allegedly being "backward" and of "low quality."[78] Still, life

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vehicles, and clashing in their thousands with riot police." The unrest was triggered by security guards attacking a street vendor, but other factors like "underlying frustration at other building social pressures including rampant food price and housing inflation, as well as corrupt local officials" also stoked the anger of many protesters; James Pomfret, "Police Use Tear Gas to Quell Riot in Southern China," Reuters, June 13, 2011, accessed January 7, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-57658220110613.

75 Chan King-Chi, "The Challenge of Labour in China," 369.

76 Rachel Connelly, Kenneth Roberts, and Zheng Zhenzhen, "The Impact of Circular Migration on the Position of Married Women in Rural China," *Feminist Economics* 16, no. 1 (January 2010): 4.

77 Ibid., 5. On the specific situation of early female migrants, see Delia Davin, "Migration, Women and Gender Issues in Contemporary China," in Thomas Scharping, ed., *Floating Population and Migration in China: The Impact of Economic Reforms* (Hamburg: Institut für Asienkunde, 1997), 297–314; also see chapter 3, section 2 on the migrant cohorts of women* in the transition period.

78 Yan Hairong, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), chapter 3.

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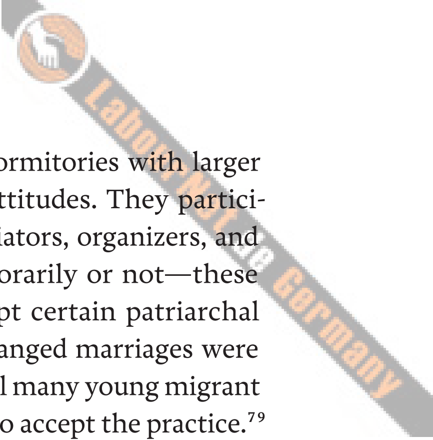

in the cities as wage laborers, often staying in dormitories with larger groups of proletarian women*, changed their attitudes. They participated in migrant workers' labor struggles as initiators, organizers, and leaders. When returning to the villages—temporarily or not—these migrant women* were often unwilling to accept certain patriarchal habits or structures any longer. For instance, arranged marriages were still common in rural families into the 2000s, until many young migrant women* who had experienced urban life refused to accept the practice.[79] They also pushed limits elsewhere, marrying later in life, having children later, eluding the control and pressure of family members, and experimenting with premarital sexual relations. Yet while migrant women* won and defended new spaces, they continued to experience exploitation, discrimination, and sexualized violence—including in reaction to their new aspirations and everyday struggles.

4 EXPANSION: THE NEW NORMAL AND THE LEAP OUTWARD, 2012–2020

As economic growth slowed down in the 2010s, the new CCP leadership under Xi Jinping adjusted its strategies and framed the lower growth rates as the "new normal." The restructuring and relocation of industries resulted in an increase of migrant workers' struggles against factory closures and redundancies. Meanwhile, the rural transformation continued with the rise of agribusiness. The ongoing patriarchal reconfiguration triggered new feminist debates and resistance. In the face of these economic, social, and political challenges, the regime tried to consolidate and rationalize government organs. It introduced new antigraft measures, tightened censorship, increased surveillance, and gave new powers to top leaders. From the mid-2010s on, it intensified its attempts to upgrade the economy and expand economic undertakings abroad through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The global expansion and increasing economic engagement, as well as the regional military buildup, challenged the US as the current hegemonic power. In 2019, the CCP regime's growing interference in Hong Kong triggered a protest movement that posed the biggest mass oppositional challenge since 1989. This movement and the social and economic problems caused by

79 Fan, *China on the Move*, 18.