

**The Political Space in Achievement of Collective Labor
Rights: Interaction between Regional Government and
Workers' Contentment**

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Abstract: 2010 witnessed that contagious strikes occurred mainly in automobile industry in Guangdong province. News regarding the first case of workers' strike Foshan Nanhai Honda had been widely circulated all over the world. Many argue that Honda workers' collective action is a transitional signal indicating a start of the era of workers' contention. And the success of subsequent union re-election and collective bargaining suggested their achievement of workers' collective rights. Nevertheless, through one-year in-depth study on workers' strike, union re-election and two respective collective bargaining processes, this article attempts to explore the "truth of the story" and the underlying mechanism which elicited the achievement of collective labor rights within the context of current Chinese politics. Arguably, the political space in accomplishing workers' collective rights is basically dependent upon the interrelationship between the workers' contentment and the "bottom line" of the local government in economic and social development. And through comparing Honda case with another one, the shrinkage of the political space of achievement of workers' collective rights implies the government's priority to political control over workers' protest by prompting more tactical collective bargaining.

Key Words: Collective Labor Rights, Political Space, Workers' Contention, Workers' Contentment

Introduction

The strike erupted in Foshan Nanhai Honda (CHAM) has been dubbed as the symbolic event of labor movement during the year 2010 in China. The most prominent characteristics of this event rested on pacification of the strike through collective bargaining and subsequent re-election of the workplace trade union. Striking workers' demands in terms of re-election of the trade union in the enterprise, wage negotiation and exemption of their collective action had been, to some extent, accommodated and confirmed by the regional government. This result apparently indicated that workers succeeded in struggling for their rights and interests by "bottom-up" protest, particularly the achievement of collective rights in a sense

(freedom of association, the right to strike and the right to collective bargaining). Chen (2011) argues that this case reflects new characteristics of resistance conducted by new industrial workers who were born from 1980s to 1990s. Furthermore, Chan and Xu (2011) point that more mature collective consciousness of new generation of rural migrant workers¹ is likely to elicit the advent of certain democratic trade union, thereby promoting direct election of trade union by rank and files as well as genuine collective bargaining.

Nevertheless, the above arguments from the perspective of workers' changes missed two noteworthy phenomena. For one thing, the Guangdong Provincial Trade Union assumed a pivotal role in re-election of the trade union in CHAM and the second collective bargaining on March of 2011. For another thing, the regional government did not address this issue by means of repression which was often employed to tackle the "quasi-collective incidents" (Cai, 2006). In contrast, the regional government created political space for contentious workers to fight for their rights and interests. In this respect, what on earth the role of the regional trade union and local government did play in the process of achievement of workers' collective rights? Did the intervention of the provincial trade union suggest the shift of union representation based on the workers' demands or the authoritative willingness due to its administrative relationship with the regional government? Why did the provincial government extricate itself from the conflict between employer and workers rather than directly interfering in the event via stifle? Can the accomplishment of workers' collective rights be attributive to workers' "bottom-up" strike or the government's "top-down" accommodation and granting rights? And if not, what is the underlying mechanism? Through one-year fieldwork research on the case of CHAM and by comparing with another Japanese-invested factory where strike also occurred during the same period, this article will answer the above questions.

Subsequently, the article will firstly construct an analytical framework on the basis of theories of political opportunity structure. And then, the next part will elaborate on the research method applied and briefly introduce two cases of strike. The next section will mainly focus on articulating why the political space for realizing workers' demands generated. And the conclusion will be reached in the last section.

The Advent of Political Space: the result of the interaction between workers' movement and the state

In the case, the incomplete achievement of collective rights can be regarded as the advent of political space for continuity and legitimacy of a labor movement as well as a possible opportunity to institutionalization. According to McCathy and McPhail

¹ The quasi-new generation of rural migrant workers in China mainly refers to those young migrant workers who were born during the period from 1980s to 1990s. Due to their different characters and dispositions from their predecessors, they are more active in pursuit of being an urban citizen rather than a peasant.

(1998: 85), the institutionalization of social movements suggests the state confirmation on the legitimacy of the social movement, which not only includes change of the government strategies and measure in face with the social movement, but also the corresponding tactics of contestants organization and actions. Obviously, the institutionalization is related to interplay between state and contestants in their respective strategies and actions. On the one hand, any shift in the legal circumstance to regulate social movement and suppressive or accommodative tactics employed by the government to cope with the social movement might elicit the institutionalization (McCathy & McPhail, 1998). Furthermore, the existing policy relevant to the labor movement is also a very crucial element (Skocpol & Amenla, 1985).

However, government strategies and actions should be compatible with development principles, namely the constraint of the state structural functions. Offe (1984) summarizes that the functions of a state in adjusting labor relations in the modern society are founded upon the balance between accumulation (economic efficiency), pacification (social stability) and legitimation (state legitimacy in a civil society). On the part of the contestants, however, Abercrombie et.al (1980) propose that changing ideology of the contestants is also important. Specifically, workers consciousness influenced by the state as well as 'remolding and transformation of the labor consciousness' (Scott, 1988) might exert crucial impact upon the institutionalization. Furthermore, the strategy and previous experiences of contestants also weigh too much (McPhail & McCathy, 2005). However, the relationship between the state and social movement is *de facto* of great volatility and complexity (Burstein et.al, 1995). For instance, whether repression, institutionalization or shifting tactics pertaining to labor movement employed by the government is susceptible to state, political parties, countermovement as well as the public attitudes, etc (Goldstone, 2003). In this manner, for the case of Honda workers' strike, exemption of workers' striking behaviors, re-election of the trade union and participation in collective bargaining cannot be completely regarded as the outcome of workers' contention. However, it should be further explored from the perspective of interaction between the state and workers' movement.

On the basis of the above analysis, arguably, the achievement of collective rights triggered by workers' collective action can be deemed as formation of political space embodied by the state's accommodative attitudes and mediating strategies to cope with workers' collective power, namely a hint of possible institutionalization upon workers' collective labor rights in a sense. Specifically, on the one hand, with respect to workers' strike, elements, such as labor consciousness, organization and movement strategy, probably exerted challenge to the government and thereby triggering government countermovement. On the other hand, the political structure which might render workers' right available encompasses issues occurred to previous labor policies, state strategies and capacity of a state to innovate valid tactics, etc. Therefore, the political space emanates from interplay between workers' movement and state response (Skocpol et.al, 1990). And the implication is that to what degree the state

can accommodate the legitimacy of workers' movement in the context of current institution, thereby regulating workers' collective actions. In this respect, this article will analyze the case of Honda for the purpose of exploring the process and political space in achievement of workers' collective rights as well as the underlying social mechanism.

Research Method

All data in this article were collected by two research methods, namely participative observation and in-depth interview. Firstly, the authors reviewed all relevant news and articles about Honda case from the press and the Internet. Then, fortunately, the authors could follow with his supervisor to take part in the first collective bargaining, observing the panorama in the site. Coupled with recording the process by observation, the author also made friends with many striking workers and then kept in touch with them. Therefore, over more than a year, we visited and interviewed 20 striking workers in their accommodations for three times. Besides, the interviewees also include 3 government officials who directly interfered in collective bargaining, 4 trade union officials, which is conducive to reliability of data collected by corresponding interviewing transcripts between different actors. Furthermore, in order to strengthen arguments and conclusion reached by analyzing Honda case, the authors also cited another case, T Company² as the evidence to prove their articulation.

In-depth interviews which mostly were semi-structural were conducted within easy and informal environments (e.g. restaurant, accommodations etc.). Questions initially are related to personal information, namely their ages, educational backdrop, previous working experiences and so forth. Moreover, respondents also recalled and discussed with interviewers regarding mobilization before the strike, strategies and interplay with the employers and other actors during the strike, re-election of workplace union as well as twice collective bargaining respectively in 2010 and 2011. Not only did they depict many stories and scenes, but also they expressed their sense, feelings and comments on different issues. In fact, through communication and exchange, different actors were able to clarify and accurately express their understanding on the achievement of collective labor rights. By comparing different opinions and views, the determinants and underlying mechanism to producing political space could be comprehensively figured out.

Brief Review of Two Cases of Honda and T Company

On May 17th, in a Japan-invested automobile component manufacturing factory in Nanhai District, Foshan Municipality, more than 1,500 workers launched a strike for over one and half a month. Majority of participants aged from 18 to 23 are 'new generation of migrant workers'. The protest mainly ascribed to their discontentment over low wage level, unfairness of the wage determination system as well as huge gap

² All data of this case was collected by Miss Chang Cheng who is our friend but in the same academic project. I very much appreciate for her help and suggestions to this research.

between Chinese and Japanese employees. According to relevant statistics, in the financial year of 2009, the profit yielded by Honda was 90% more than the same period in 2008, approximately 3.9 billion US dollars. However, the total amount of wage growth for Chinese workers was merely 500,000 CNY. The ever-rising price of goods rendered workers vulnerable to shoulder heavy economic burden in their daily life. Then they were reluctant to endure the unequal wage. Consequently, by communication on the Internet, QQ community³ and mobile phone, under the leadership of Mr. X and Mr. L, workers initiated their last resort. As strike continued longer and longer, the whole global production chain of Honda vehicles was forced to terminate mainly because striking workers stopped producing gearbox that is a very crucial component of a vehicle.

Strategy employed by striking workers in Honda was different from the orthodox protest and demonstration outside the factory, they only walked around the ground of factory, singing patriotic songs and shouting patriotic slogans. During the strike, the employer and county trade union threatened and repressed striking workers, for instance, sacking two activists who incipiently led the strike, making collusion with the schools where student workers came from to threaten them by graduation certificates, coercing students workers to forsake continuous protest by signing a letter of assurance, as well as violently hitting many activists from ZZ workshop. In particular, violent action made by the county trade union further infuriated workers, thereby motivating many workers who had returned to work joining the striking team again. At this very severe moment, Mr. Z in the capacity of NPC(National Peoples' Congress) member and the Chinese chief manager of Guangdong Honda Joint Venture⁴ to get involved in this case for alleviating the industrial conflict. Simultaneously, a few government officials from Nanhai District government also followed suit in the case to promote the collective bargaining as the solution to the conflict. By their contributions, workers admitted to temporarily recover production on June 1st. And 30 workers' representatives were also transiently elected in a very informal way to negotiate with Mr. Z. However, Mr. Z, at the outset, failed to make a compromise with workers representatives, but the legal consultant threatened workers again by arguing their illegal behavior in the form of strike. Consequently, the negotiation stopped in an impasse. On June 3rd, workers uploaded a letter in public on the Internet for asking assistance and help in society, prominently showing their aspiration for negotiation with the employer and re-election of workplace trade union.

On June 4th, due to intervention of Prof. C as workers legal consultant, workers' representatives finally clarify their own demands and ascertained their negotiating tactics. At the first round of bargaining, the government officials from district government announced principles which must be obeyed by both the employer and workers' representatives. The original union chair as one of the chief representatives

³ QQ community is a sort of cyber community on the Internet, which is attached to QQ, a communicative tool like MSN or Skype.

⁴ The CHAM is one of the suppliers which belong to the Honda Company, and the Guangdong Honda Joint Venture is also a part of Honda but a jointly operated enterprise by both Japanese and Chinese investors.

had not been altered. And the other four are all activists who played a role as leaders at strike. After three rounds of negotiation, workers and the Japanese employer eventually made an agreement under the legal framework. 300 CNY were increased in the part of basic wage, and 500 CNY in total. Noticeably, among over 100 requirements raised by workers, those relevant to collective labor rights were accepted by the employer to some extent, including legal exemption of strike, re-election of the workplace trade union and establishment of collective bargaining mechanism⁵. Hereafter, by intervention and surveillance of the regional trade union of G province, workers and staffs in CHAM re-elected the workplace union representatives without replacing the union chair. However, the vice union chair was finally changed into a common worker from the grass-root. And on March 2011, workers also successfully harvested 611 CNY of wage growth through the second collective bargaining. Despite wage growth, the front-line workers were merely entitled to express their own demands on wage issues to the leader of each and every workers group pre-elected. However, at the formal collective bargaining site, only a couple of front-line workers were permitted to take part in as auditors without right to say. And during the whole process, no one made any proposition about legitimacy of their collective rights.

After workers' strike in Honda, a consecutive effect of strike erupted in the area of Pearl River Delta. One of the notable cases is workers' strike in T Company, another Japan-invested automobile component manufacturing factory in Guangdong. In general, although the model of collective action could not be seen as a copy of Honda, the solution characterized by intervention of the government and the regional trade union replicated. By tackling the Honda case, Guangdong provincial government adopted previous experiences and lessons, clearly defining the principles of economic and political development. The local government also invited district trade union to jointly promoted collective bargaining to mitigate and resolve the industrial conflict. Finally, workers' wage in T Company rose by 400 CNY in basic compensation and 150 CNY in other parts. Simultaneously, legal exemption of strike and establishment of continuous wage collective bargaining mechanism was not disagreed between Japanese employer and employees.

It is noteworthy that workers in T Company also had a proposition of re-election of workplace trade union which was not contented and consented by the union and the Japanese employer. Although under the direction and support from the district trade union, the workplace trade union could represent workers in enforcing collective bargaining pertaining to wage increase with the employer, what they had done is merely to collect workers' requirements and demands in a fixed procedure rather than relying on support and empowerment of workers' solidarity.

⁵ In official word, the mechanism should be called wage collective consultation in accordance with relevant labor law. And the first wage collective consultation was very similar to genuine collective bargaining due to maintaining impact of workers' collective power. But the second collective bargaining has been essentially changed under the control and manipulation of the regional trade union.

Achievement of Collective Labor Rights: The Emergence of Political Opportunity and the Limitation of Workers' Contentment

The Emergence of Political Space: the basis of institutionalization and expedient of the regional development

Pertinent to the case of Honda workers' strike, the attitude of the government in G province towards the strike should barely be underestimated. Initially, the trade unionist's misdemeanors by beating striking workers in ZZ workshop was connived by the regional government (Labor Bureau of NH District); however, the regional government highly changed its perspective on this issue, i.e. addressing the labor dispute by promoting collective bargaining between the employer and employees. It is the indicator of the political opportunity emerged. Political opportunity structure can be divided into two parts, stable elements of the structure and precarious ones (Gmason & Meyer, 1996). The shift of government attitudes and tactics to address the strike was mainly based on both stable and unstable facets in political structure. One is the existing and relevant labor policies related to the workers' collective actions (Skocpol & Amenla, 1985), namely the legal foundation of the collective labor rights. This is also the basis of legitimacy of the trade union behavior in handling labor disputes. The other is the principles adjusted by the government in accordance with specific economic and political circumstance in pursuit of new development.

Stable Political Opportunity: top-down legalization and the role of the state

Since 1990s, in the history of workers' struggle for their own interests, the government actively mitigated the pressure through legislation. Although the enactment of The Labor Law as the foundation of Chinese workers' rights on January 1st, 1994 as well as the institutional system of collective agreement and collective consultation (Clarke et.al, 2004), the ever-increasing labor unrest was not be alleviated. Therefore, from 2007 to 2008, the Labor Contract Law, the Labor Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Law and the Employment Promotion Law were consecutively enacted. The indication is that Chinese government intended to considerably reduce the increasing amount of workers' collective actions by virtue of legislation on individualized labor dispute resolutions. For instance, the labor legislations conformed to government requirement of harmonious labor relations, simultaneously, legal channels had been given to workers to defend their rights and interests. However, the enactment and implementation of the Labor Contract Law did not effectively fulfill its purpose in protecting workers' right and interests because of opposition from foreign employers' associations, the circumvention of many enterprises and the impact of the global recession (Wang, 2010). Furthermore, the legalization on the individual labor rights could not address the essential problem of imbalance of power between employers and workers. With regard to protecting

workers' collective rights, notably, freedom of association, right to strike and right to collective bargaining, the state basically made no difference (Chan et.al, 2010) .

Nevertheless, right to strike and right to collective bargaining had been regulated in a sense in the Chinese labor law system. Although the term of 'right to strike' was abolished from the Constitution in 1982, the standing committee of People's Congress ratified the regulation about 'right to strike' in the United Nations Covenant on Economic , Social , and Cultural Rights. Moreover, the Article 27⁶ in the Trade Union Law amended in 1992 also included relevant rules over strike issue. Even if 'strike (*bagong*)' was replaced by 'stoppage (*tinggong*)', Chang (2010) argues that the potential prerequisite in addressing workers' strike should lie in granting the right to them, though there is no very accurate regulation. In addition, handling the strike and recovery of production is reliant on satisfying workers' 'reasonable demands', which also is an indicator of protection on workers' strike behaviors.

Furthermore, the earliest legislation, notably the Labor Law promulgated in 1994 and Collective Contract Regulation enacted by the Ministry of Labor (MoHRSS) specified the collective bargaining right. However, the regulation of collective contract also obviously illustrated that the collective contract should be the product in the way of collective consultation rather than collective bargaining (Warner & Ng, 1999:303-4) . In this respect, the collective contract regulation could not reflect the essence of collective bargaining. For the specific rules, neither is there sufficient articles closely related to collective bargaining, nor is any union members are included in drafting collective contract. In regard with the implementation, employers are reluctant to adopt any substantive details in the collective contract, which characterizes the collective contract as formalization, superficiality and standardization. Consequently, the institution failed to promote the trade union to offer an effective avenue by which workers can have voice in their demands and discontent (Clarke, 2003; Tsui, 2006) . In final analysis, without authentic workers' participation guaranteed their collective power, there would be no effective right to workers in determining collective contract.

Although the collective labor rights had been, to some degree, legalized by the state, the so-called legalization of right to strike and collective bargaining implies that the government chose a top-down path in legislation. Consequently, the frequent industrial actions are inevitable (Chan, 2009) . Notwithstanding, this type of incomplete 'top-down' legislation created a legitimate foundation for the achievement of Honda workers' collective labor rights. This is also the foundation for Honda workers' to gain collective labor rights in a sense. For instance, the exemption of liability of strike was referred to the Article 27 in the Trade Union Law.

6 Article 27: In case of work-stoppage or slow-down strike in an enterprise or institution, the trade union shall, on behalf of the workers and staff members, hold consultation with the enterprise or institution or the parties concerned, present the opinions and demands of the workers and staff members, and put forth proposals for solutions. With respect to the reasonable demands made by the workers and staff members, the enterprise or institution shall try to satisfy them. The trade union shall assist the enterprise or institution in properly dealing with the matter so as to help restore the normal order of production and other work as soon as possible.

Precarious Political Opportunity: trajectory confirmed by the regional government in development

Gallagher (2005) argued that the model of economic growth coupled with stagnation of political reform can be deemed as a model featured by state-dominated capitalism. In reality, the model varies from different places at the different stage of development in China. For G province, the government predestined the economic and political development trajectory in 2010, i. e. the government in G province should highlight more on industrial upgrading⁷ after economic recession 2008 while continuously undertaking the compelling task of protecting social stability assigned by the central government to each and every provincial government. And it was the trajectory that formed the political opportunities for the success of workers' strike. Hence, the political opportunities flew from the social stability and economic advancement in the regional government. As two provincial government official said,

“.....the labor dispute is a superficial phenomenon; the underlying problem it reflected is a necessary issue in economic transition. It can be reckoned as a contradiction pertinent to the structural adjustment.....the government must prevent from incidents erupted, and spend time in discussing the relationship between labor conflict and structural transition of industry.....the local government officials are also obligatory to rationally cope with the issue by clamming down workers. We need to make law in an appropriate way in order to achieve the goal.” (NHLBZ100812)⁸

“Comrade M is a very rational and foreseeable man. He said that it might not be a negative issue if under the control.....He also proposed three principles. Firstly, the strike is a traditional way in which workers could defend their rights. It can also motivate economic change as well. Secondly, strike is the transitional point in adjusting distributive situation. Lastly, strike is a new opportunity to improve humanistic concern over workers life.” (GDSZD100917)⁹

The shifting volatile elements of political opportunity is more conducive to comprehend interplay between the impact of political space and contenders' strategic choices (Gmason & Meyer, 1996). However, contenders sometimes cannot sense the existence of volatile elements of political opportunity, and these elements are likely to constrain contenders' behavior. As Meyer (2004) emphasized, it is of necessity to correspond the political opportunity to those results elicited by them. Therefore, for the case of Honda, it is self-evident that the political opportunities included previous legal regulations and policies regarding collective labor rights as stable elements as well as economic and political trajectory as precarious ones. The influence wielded by this political opportunity structure embodied in the achievement of collective labor

⁷LiYuequn, 'Guangdong Tenglong Huanniao', *Oriental Morning News*, (李跃群, “广东‘腾龙换鸟’”, 《东方早报》)2011-1-20, <http://www.dfdaily.com/html/113/2011/1/20/560888.shtml>, quoted on 2012/3/8.

⁸ Quoted from the transcript of interview with a government official on August 12th 2010.

⁹ Quoted from the transcript of interview with a union official on September 17th 2010.

rights.

Intervention of the Regional Trade Union: extension of political control

As the political space appeared and became more explicit, the professionals, such as Mr. Z and Prof. C basically terminated their role in handling strike issue as consultants at the first collective bargaining. Afterwards, trade union of G province immediately intervened within the process of re-election of workplace trade union and the second collective bargaining. So to speak, the provincial trade union definitely possessed legal legitimacy to interfere in the two procedures. However, superficially, the provincial trade union took responsibility for organizing workers in voting for new union representatives in the workplace, and striving to negotiate more wage growth for workers at the second collective bargaining¹⁰. Therefore, evidently, provincial trade union displayed their representative role in directing and organizing workers in a procedural election as well as defending their interests. It can be seen as the union's impact upon achievement of right to association and right to collective bargaining.

Apparently, the provincial trade union extensively got involved in prompting achievement of collective labor rights. Nevertheless, as Chen (2010) pinpointed, as a part of government system, the union's objective, strategy and behavior are confined within the boundary set up by the government. Therefore, due to proactive intervention of the provincial trade union, to what extent the re-election of trade union in workplace could be democratically implemented is subject to elaboration in light of the process and result of the election. On the one hand, the union chair within the workplace had not been covered by the re-election. On the other hand, although workers who had striking experiences and those activists who were willing to run for union representatives were all allowed to participate in the election campaign, however, majority of union representatives elected were staffs and management. The rate of front-line workers was very low. As a worker who used to run for a representative position said,

“They muddled through to a large extent without completely abiding by rules and regulations. They designed a lot of rituals in the election. Do you think they obeyed the rules? No, they did not. They announced the rate of frontline workers among all union representatives elected; however, most of them elected are management. There are only two or three frontline workers become the union representatives in the workplace. Supervisors were also regarded as the frontline workers. Superficially, the result stemmed from election, but actually it was not.”
(BTGRL100813)¹¹

“...I would like to compete for the position of the chair of branch union group, and communicated with the vice union chair of the provincial union. I told to him that the Article 30 suggested more concern over female candidates. However, it was very difficult for frontline

¹⁰Huang Yinglai, 'Nanhai Honda Strike Event: The Japanese Side Finally Accepted the Wage Increase Scheme', *South Daily*, (黄应来, “南海本田停工事件: 日方最终接受增加工资方案”, 《南方日报》)2011-03-02, http://gd.nfdaily.cn/content/2011-03/02/content_20591437.htm, quoted on 2012/3/8.

¹¹ Quoted from the transcript of interview with Miss. L, a striking worker on August 13th 2010.

workers to be elected.” (BTGRL110311) ¹²

Besides, at the second collective bargaining held on March 2011, the G provincial trade union directed its branch in the workplace to collect workers’ demands regarding wage increase, meanwhile facilitating union representatives to negotiate higher growth of workers’ wages. In reality, the regional trade union exerted its own impact upon the result of collective bargaining. The very grass-root workers had no opportunity to take part in at the spot. And chief representatives who were entitled to negotiate with employers are union officials elected in re-election. Even only a couple of front-line workers could join in the process as auditors. In comparison with the first collective bargaining¹³, the rate of the rank and file highly shrunk. And the mechanism of negotiation merely focused on nothing other than wage issue. As a worker said,

“Before the formal collective bargaining, what the group leaders did was nothing other than collecting information from frontline workers. And then, they could audit at the bargaining spot without any right to expressing their own opinion.” (BTGRF110311) ¹⁴

“At collective bargaining, apart from wage issue, is there any other requirements raised by union representatives?”

“Yes, basically, only wage issue was raised because both the company and workplace trade union asked for negotiating wage, particularly the basic wage. Other sorts of demands were also proposed, but they are just our own opinion without being adopted in negotiation. In fact, we usually raised many problems.” (BTGRF110311) ¹⁵

Obviously, the intervention of regional trade union indicates that re-election of workplace trade union and collective bargaining should be politically stable and under the control of the government. Meanwhile, potential solidarity in the form of strike can be, to a large degree, disrupted and avoided by the negotiating mechanism. Re-organization of workplace trade union exacerbated workers’ power in influencing unionists’ determination. The regional trade union *de facto* interfered within the case as a extensive supervisor instead of provincial government, which ensured workplace union’s behavior confined in the boundary of economic and political development in G province. Eventually, stable employment relationship can be sustained while the political control over the union re-election and collective bargaining can be achieved. The regional union played an extensive part in controlling the degree to which workers’ collective rights can be realized.

Limitation of Workers’ Contentment

Even if striking workers effectively mobilized their resources¹⁶ and manipulated

¹² Quoted from the transcript of interview with Miss. L, a striking worker on March 11th 2011.

¹³ At the first collective bargaining after the strike, apart from the original workplace union chair as one of five chief negotiating representatives, the other four were frontline workers who were also the activists within the strike.

¹⁴ Quoted from the transcript of interview with Mr. F, a striking worker on March 11th 2011.

¹⁵ Quoted from the transcript of interview with Mr. F, a striking worker on March 11th 2011.

¹⁶ Resources not only related to their positions in the production and labor market which they were able to

strategies which made difference on the result of their protest, what they were truly concerned about is whether their wage could be possibly increased and how many more they could gain. The main reason why they resorted to strike was mainly attributive to low wage level. At the first collective bargaining, the extent of wage increase was their chief focus, arousing various opinions and arguments. As a worker expressed,

“As a matter of fact, we had waited for wage increase. If they agreed to increase by 100 Kuai (unit of CNY), we would be very satisfactory.” (BTGRC100020) ¹⁷

After election of the workplace union, most of workers did not show their proactivity on demanding other collective rights. Another worker showed,

“They did not have any complaint on the chaotic procedure of election. They did not know the truth and hardly care. Many of us felt annoying; we did not believe it would make any difference. Although it is better that the representatives can truly help us, the more issues we had, the more bothered we felt.” (BTGRL100813) ¹⁸

Furthermore, at the second collective bargaining, most of workers were satisfactory with the agreement between employers and unionists, though only wage increase was included in the negotiating process. And they praised and approved that the vice union chair could help them to bargain more wages with the employer. As a workers said,

“Chairman K assumed a very pivotal role.....he basically helped us. When management proposed the final plan, we did not agree. And then they wanted to resort to legal arbitration. Mr. K criticized their lack of integrity. They also asked if we were contented with the growth of bonus. He, as an experienced man, made differences as a representative from the upper trade union, he mediated many things.” (BTGRF110311) ¹⁹

Workers' satisfactory response suggests that they will not insist on previous demands about democratic re-election of trade union. It is doubtless that some activists had held burgeoning labor consciousness at the political level, such as aspiring for more proactive involvement in union re-election. In contrast, most of workers' labor consciousness only rested on economic demands. If their demands on wage increase can be contented, they did not care more about whether they could truly take part in union re-election or get more involved in the collective bargaining buttressed by their collective power. Consequently, the economic awareness of workers was not incompatible with the developing boundary in both the political and economic aspects. Pacifying industrial conflict by means of government-dominated and union-boosted collective bargaining served to create a harmonious and stable circumstance for economic advancement. Meanwhile, this sort of negotiating mechanism did not break

manipulate, but also included mass media, the Internet space, professional experts' intervention and so forth.

¹⁷ Quoted from the transcript of interview with Mr. C, a striking worker on October 02th 2010.

¹⁸ Quoted from the transcript of interview with Miss. L, a striking worker on August 13th 2010.

¹⁹ Quoted from the transcript of interview with Mr. F, a striking worker on March 11th 2011.

the social pacification under the political control of the government.

Shrinking Political Space

In light of the above discussion, when the regional trade union intervened within the re-election of the workplace trade union and the second collective bargaining, arguably, the regional trade union is compelled to guide these two things under more stringent supervision and control. Hence, the workplace trade union can have the political support by the provincial trade union which had been endorsed as the extensive supervisor instead of the government because of its legitimate role as the only representative for workers. The trade union tactically constrained the workers' participation within the procedure and principles predestined by management and union when collective bargaining imitated. As a result, if the first negotiation after the strike can be reckoned as collective bargaining owing to influence by workers' collective power, the second one appeared more like a 'collective consultation' in the linguistic context of the government.

Furthermore, because of workers' interest-oriented demands, as they were deeply embedded in the procedure of the collective bargaining promoted by the trade union, what they are interested more in is nothing other than the wage increase. Most of them passively participated in the collective bargaining procedure without depending on their original collective power spontaneously formed during strike. And they had been less likely to struggle for legal rights to strike or autonomy. As a consequence, the political space for achieving collective labor rights shrunk to a large degree.

Similarly, pertaining to the case of T Company, the government of G province collaborated with other government branch agencies, especially the district trade union, to address worker's strike. The regional government drew lessons from the experiences accumulated from Honda case. Not only did they ask the district trade union to strive to promote collective bargaining, but also both the government and union realized workers' economic demands on wage increase. The governmental counter-strategy against workers' strike basically came into being. Therefore, as the workers' demands and political opportunities became more explicit, the political space for collective labor rights was gradually narrowing down. Even though workers' collective action was legally exempted, and collective bargaining was committed to be a regulatory bargaining mechanism, workers' power to continuous protest was simultaneously impaired. Shrinking political space, as a consequence, posed more constraint over possibility to collective rights accomplishment.

Conclusion

It is no doubt that the uniqueness of Honda case rests in the accomplishment of collective labor rights. Without strike, there would by no means be such a result which implies the effectiveness of workers' collective power. However, the political space of collective labor rights is attributive to interaction between workers' contention and

both the government and trade union's intervention within the labor conflict adjustment, collective bargaining as well as union re-organization. More accurately, interplay between two key factors, namely the advent of political opportunity and the level of labor consciousness which are underlying elements generates political opportunity for achievement of collective labor rights.

Specifically, on the one hand, the reason why the government of G province did not address the strike by repression is mainly due to the trajectories of economic and social development. Alternatively stated, the government expectation on industrial advancement and obligation for social stability resulted in its accommodative attitudes towards workers' strike and endeavor in prompting collective bargaining as the effective solution. Simultaneously, the pre-existing legislation regarding workers' collective labor rights also formed the legitimate basis for workers demands on collective rights.

On the other hand, owing to the limited labor consciousness of Honda workers, once their economic demands could be contented, their enthusiasm and determination to political change about legitimacy of collective rights would be deteriorated. Therefore, the political requirements raised by the Honda workers are merely a sort of tool for the purpose of guaranteeing achievement of their economic demands. The economic interest-oriented consciousness also rendered workers' solidarity discontinuous. Consequently, both of these factors are mutually compatible with each other, thereby achieving workers' collective labor rights to some degree.

Furthermore, to what extent workers' extensive struggle for their rights and interests can be based on their previously contentious experiences should be measured from two dimensions, notably, the political opportunity and labor contentment through observation and analysis in a long run. Nonetheless, the shrinkage of political space implies that the state aimed to transform and avert the potential of workers' collective action and collective consciousness by a state-dominated and union-promoted collective bargaining. Political control still remained highly prioritized by the government and state in coping with industrial conflict *per se*.

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