

Call for Contributions – Deadline extended to June 20, 2011

Workers' Struggles from East to West: New Perspectives on Labour Disputes in Globalised China

Conference to be held in Vienna, Austria,
from Thursday 22nd to Saturday 24th September 2011

It is well known to researchers and activists, both in the labour/union movement and at universities, that during the last decades of neoliberal “globalisation” the worlds of work and employment have been profoundly transformed. Moreover, as has been powerfully demonstrated again by the recent global economic crisis, socio-economic developments and the transformations of labour realities in different regions of the world are highly interconnected and mutually influence each other. However, while the capital side continues to optimise capital accumulation on a global scale (by an international organisation of working processes and an externalisation of social costs) the international coordination of labour organisations is still quite limited and has not yet given rise to a global labour movement.

This lack of international coordination in the realm of labour is particularly discernible in the cases of China and Europe. While during the last thirty years, China has become the “world’s factory”, the transformation of industrial relations within the country and on a global scale, are still being discussed in Europe predominantly in terms of a “threat” of shift of investments and jobs to China or more generally with regard to the implications of low-wage competition. In fact, the production of goods “made in China” is predominantly characterised by high profit margins at different levels of global supply chains and based on high exploitation rates as well as environmental destruction. However, the knowledge about and the mutual understanding of different working conditions as an essential pre-condition for collective action has not been considered in any great depth so far. Presently little serious and authentic information on social movements and labour disputes within the country is available outside of China. In addition, only limited information on specific historical and institutional conditions is attainable. This reinforces wide-spread clichés on both sides.

Especially since the mid 1990s, China has experienced essential transformations in the realm of labour. The unmaking of the old working class made up of (former) workers in state owned enterprises following large-scale privatisation efforts was accompanied by the making of a new working class of migrant-workers (*nongmingong*; “peasant-workers”) whose number has already reached more than 200 million people. Moreover, there has recently been a significant increase in labour disputes and strikes in China which are becoming more and more successful. Despite widespread opinions that the “middle class” will mainly influence the country’s development, it is obvious that these struggles of a new working class have the potential to fundamentally shape the future of China and across the border.

This context will provide the background for our conference which aims to bring together researchers and activists to discuss – in solidarity with the labour movements – key features of labour relations and workers’ struggles in China and Europe and, thereby, to encourage further cooperation in academic and activist terms.

We are certainly aware that there are also undeniable differences between the worlds of work and employment in China and Europe and that the task of “comparing” different situations based on specific historical-institutional developments is not unproblematic. Nevertheless, we believe that regarding such issues as the impact of the crisis on working conditions and labour disputes, the role of trade unions, the situation of migrant-workers or the increase of precarious work it is necessary to deepen the debate between researchers and activists in both regions.

At this conference, therefore, we aim not only to bring together experts in the field of labour from two different regions of the world but essentially also to challenge the demarcations which still separate the university from the rest of society and to bring together researchers and labour/union movement activists in joint discussions.

Apart from some invited key-speakers (Pun Ngai from Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Chang Kai from Renmin University Beijing, Lu Huilin from Peking University, Anita Chan and Jonathan Unger from Australian National University who have, among others, already confirmed their participation) **we are seeking contributions by researchers and activists on, but not limited to, the following topics:**

- China's socio-economic transformation and its impacts on industrial relations and the transformation of labour relations in Europe
- The impact of China's economic rise on labour relations and the labour/union movements in Europe
- Realities of labour and the protection of labour rights in China and Europe
- The situation of Chinese migrant workers (including migration-, class- and gender-perspectives) and comparisons with the situation of migrants in Europe
- State strategies in regulating labour relations in China and Europe
- The specific situation of working women in China and Europe
- The impact of the crisis and of post-crisis policies on working conditions in China and Europe
- Reports on recent labour disputes in China and some comparisons with Europe
- Perspectives of solidarity on labour and civil cooperation between China and Europe
- Experiences of labour NGO's in dealing with recent socio-economic transformations in China and Europe
- Perspectives on the trade union work in China and Europe and possibilities for cooperation in/against global capitalism

Details concerning the conference

- **Project executing organisations:** Transform Austria (aligned with the European Left Party), Renner Institute (aligned with the Austrian Socialdemocrats), Gruene Bildungswerkstatt Wien (aligned with the Austrian Green Party), Weltumspannend arbeiten (Organisation within the Austrian Federation of Trade Unions), Arbeiterkammer Austria (Official representation of employees in Austria), Department of Political Science (University of Vienna), Department of

East Asian Studies (University of Vienna), Department of Development Studies (University of Vienna)

- **Location** of the conference: Renner Institute, Kheslplatz 12, 1120 Vienna, Austria
- The conference will open on Thursday evening (September 22) with a public discussion at the University of Vienna (the exact location will be announced soon). From September 23-24 the Conference will be held at the Renner Institute (location: see above). The conference will close on Saturday, September 24, in the afternoon.
- The language of the conference will be **English**; we will provide interpreters (Chinese-English; partly also Chinese-German).
- We will be able to provide airline tickets, accommodation and meals for about 10 participants from China and/or other non-European countries.
- Further participants are responsible for their own travel and accommodation costs. Please find a list of suggestions for accommodation options at <http://labourchina.univie.ac.at>
- General registration for the conference is free and open from June 15, 2011. Please register by using the online registration form available at <http://labourchina.univie.ac.at>

Submission of proposals for contributions

- **Extended Deadline:** June 20, 2011
- Submit your abstract of 200-300 words to Daniel Fuchs: daniel.fuchs@univie.ac.at
- Include a brief biographical statement (max. 150 words).
- We will notify you by June 30, 2011 if your proposal was accepted.

For **further information** about the conference please visit the homepage of the conference <http://labourchina.univie.ac.at> or contact the organisers:

Josef Baum (Transform Austria)
Daniel Fuchs (University of Vienna)
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