

“This is certainly the time for a Marcuse revival!” —Fredric Jameson, Duke University

THE GREAT REFUSAL

HERBERT MARCUSE AND
CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS



WITH A FOREWORD BY ANGELA Y. DAVIS

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“One of the great 20th century critical theorists of domination and liberation, Herbert Marcuse has an enormous amount to say to our time. *The Great Refusal* makes this abundantly clear. The contributors draw Marcuse’s imaginative reworking of Hegel, Marx, Freud, and Weber into illuminating conversations with a diverse range of contemporary theorists and political movements...from those of the Zapatistas and Chinese factory workers to the Arab Spring and Occupy. This book is a treasure trove for scholars and activists alike.”

—Wendy Brown, University of California, Berkeley

An in-depth examination of the relevance of Marcuse’s writing for today’s social movements



Herbert Marcuse examined the subjective and material conditions of radical social change and developed the “Great Refusal,” a radical concept of “the protest against that which is.” The editors and contributors to the exciting new volume *The Great Refusal* provide an analysis of contemporary social movements around the world with particular reference to Marcuse’s revolutionary concept. The book also engages—and puts Marcuse in critical dialogue with—major theorists including Slavoj Žižek and Michel Foucault, among others.

The chapters in this book analyze different elements and locations of the contemporary wave of struggle, drawing on the work and vision of Marcuse in order to reveal, with a historical perspective, the present moment of resistance. Essays seek to understand recent uprisings—such as the Zapatistas in Mexico, the Arab Spring, and the Occupy movement—in the context of Marcuse’s powerful conceptual apparatus.

The Great Refusal also charts contemporary social movements against global warming, mass incarceration, police brutality, white supremacy, militarization, technological development, and more, to provide insights that advance our understanding of resistance today.

Contributors include: Kevin B. Anderson, Stanley Aronowitz, Joan Braune, Jenny Chan, Angela Y. Davis, Arnold L. Farr, Andrew Feenberg, Michael Forman, Christian Fuchs, Stefan Gandler, Christian Garland, Toorjo Ghose, Imaculada Kangussu, George Katsiaficas, Douglas Kellner, Sarah Lynn Kleeb, Filip Kovacevic, Lauren Langman, Heather Love, Peter Marcuse, Martin J. Beck Matuščík, Russell Rockwell, AK Thompson, Marcelo Vieta, and the editors—Andrew T. Lamas, Todd Wolfson, and Peter N. Funke.

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The Great Refusal

HERBERT MARCUSE
and Contemporary Social Movements

Edited by ANDREW T. LAMAS, TODD WOLFSON,
and PETER N. FUNKE

Foreword by ANGELA Y. DAVIS

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Foreword

Abolition and Refusal

ANGELA Y. DAVIS

Freedom is a constant struggle. The linkage between resistance and liberation is a central teaching of every freedom struggle. It is the central premise of this book, which critically examines Herbert Marcuse's concept of the "Great Refusal" and its relevance for understanding contemporary social movements.

The idea for this book was born in 2011, amid the Occupy movement, at the "Critical Refusals" conference in Philadelphia organized by the International Herbert Marcuse Society.¹ In my remarks at that conference, delivered from the same podium where my teacher Herbert Marcuse had spoken forty years earlier, I acknowledged what a great privilege it was then, and remains today, to have been his student and to have had him as my mentor.²

Today, nearly five years later, I write these words on the occasion of another amazing conference in Philadelphia—"Reclaiming Our Future: The Black Radical Tradition in Our Time."³ At this very same moment, at the International Rosa Luxemburg conference in Berlin,⁴ activists are launching

1. The conference was held October 27–29, 2011, at the University of Pennsylvania.

2. Angela Y. Davis, "Critical Refusals and Occupy," *Radical Philosophy Review* 16, no. 2 (2013): 425–439.

3. The conference was held January 8–10, 2016, at Temple University and two historic Black churches, Mother Bethel AME Church and Church of the Advocate. For more information, see the conference website, at <http://www.theblackradicaltradition.org>.

4. The twenty-first annual International Rosa Luxemburg conference, held January 9, 2016, in Berlin, was titled "Kein Gott, Kein Kaiser, Kein Tribun: Selber Tun!" (No God, No Emperor, No Tribune: Do It Yourself!). For more information, see the conference website, at <http://www.rosa-luxemburg-konferenz.de>.

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Chinese Workers in Global Production and Local Resistance

JENNY CHAN

With a shift in manufacturing from the developed countries of North America, Europe, and East Asia to the emerging economies, China has become not only the workshop of the world but also the epicenter of labor unrest. Given China's preeminence as the twenty-first century's largest economy and its continued integration into, and transformation of, the global capitalist system, victories by and defeats of working people in China are of world historical significance. It has been suggested that elements of a Marcusean approach to industrial capitalist society—particularly the concept of the Great Refusal as transformational resistance from the margins of society—may be useful to scholars and activists developing today's critical theory of the Chinese situation.¹ Herbert

My gratitude, first and foremost, goes to Andy Lamas. I immensely benefited from his theoretical insights and passionate engagement with Herbert Marcuse's arguments. He enriches our understanding of the politics of labor in globalized China and in the world. I also thank Ngai Pun and Mark Selden, who have guided me through my graduate studies and academic career development in Hong Kong and England.

1. "Marcuse's concept of the Great Refusal may prove useful for understanding widespread resistance in contemporary China. Given that this resistance is so often generated by those who are among the most marginalized and precariously situated of China's working class, namely, rural migrant workers, Marcuse's observations about resistance from the margins of a totally administered society seem relevant and prescient." Andrew T. Lamas, "Accumulation of Crises, Abundance of Refusals," *Radical Philosophy Review* 19, no. 1 (2016): 4. For Marcuse's use of the Great Refusal concept, see Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon, 1955); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1964); and Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1969).

Marcuse did not write extensively about China, though he did offer perceptive critique. In an April 1978 interview, in which he discussed the potential of Cuba and China to develop "the foundations for a free and just society," Marcuse said that "as far as both are concerned, especially China, it seems to me we see there the same we have seen so many times, namely the priority of repressive modernization over liberating socialization: a technocratic authoritarian trend, at the expense of socialism."² With the turn toward what was officially termed "socialist modernization" and the development of a capitalist-oriented market economy—engineered (after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976) by Hua Guofeng, Zhao Ziyang, Deng Xiaoping, and other Chinese leaders—evidence for Marcuse's evaluation of "repressive modernization" continues to be manifest in the country's widespread workplace resistance.

Yet even as the size and complexity of China's working class grows, class contradictions sharpen, and social protest proliferates, the language of class has largely disappeared from Chinese discourse.³ As Ching Kwan Lee and Yuan Shen demonstrate, under dual pressure from the state and academic institutions, many scholars who study workers in post-Cultural Revolution China "shun class analysis and define away labor issues as those of mobility, migration, and stratification."⁴ For them the word *class* connotes antagonism and confrontation in the Marxist sense, eliciting dark memories of violent social struggles throughout China in the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. It is an image that is out of step with the "harmonious society" and the "Chinese dream" that contemporary China's leaders proclaim.⁵ Policy makers

2. Herbert Marcuse and Gianguido Piani, "An Interview with Herbert Marcuse by Gianguido Piani," in *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol. 6, *Marxism, Revolution, and Utopia*, ed. Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce (New York: Routledge, 2014), 366.

3. Beverly J. Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Ho-fung Hung, ed., *China and the Transformation of Global Capitalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Ching Kwan Lee and Mark Selden, "Inequality and Its Enemies in Revolutionary and Reform China," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 52 (2008): 27–36; Ann Anagnost, "From 'Class' to 'Social Strata': Grasping the Social Totality in Reform-Era China," *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2008): 497–519; Joel Andreas, "Industrial Restructuring and Class Transformation in China," in *China's Peasants and Workers: Changing Class Identities*, ed. Beatriz Carrillo and David S. G. Goodman (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2012), 102–123; Alvin Y. So, *Class and Class Conflict in Post-socialist China* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2013); David S. G. Goodman, *Class in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014).

4. Ching Kwan Lee and Yuan Shen, "China: The Paradox and Possibility of a Public Sociology of Labor," *Work and Occupations* 36, no. 2 (2009): 110.

5. Xi Jinping, who became China's president in 2013, is associated with the phrase "Chinese dream," while his predecessor Hu Jintao is associated with the concept of a "harmonious society," though it is an ancient idea in Chinese culture. For a discussion of Hu's conception of the "harmonious society," see You-tien Hsing and Ching Kwan Lee, eds., *Reclaiming Chinese Society: The New Social Activism* (London: Routledge, 2010); and Maureen Fan, "China's

and academics working in a social stratification paradigm analyze data on household income distribution, educational attainment, and occupational rankings to document the rise of a middle class, or various middle-class strata, while downplaying durable and deepening structures of class inequality. In this context, this chapter discusses the Chinese rural migrant workers, particularly their collective struggles within a framework that highlights the intensification of contradictions among labor, capital, and the state.

With the influx of foreign direct investment and the relaxation of state restrictions on rural-to-urban migration since the 1980s, successive cohorts of internal migrant workers have become the core of China's new working class in transnational manufacturing. By 2013, some 268 million Chinese rural migrants were drawn into industrialization and urbanization, an increase of 44 million from 2008, when the National Bureau of Statistics began to monitor the work and employment conditions of the rural migrant labor force in the wake of the global financial crisis.⁶ China's economy was hit hard, as exports had comprised one-third of gross domestic product (GDP) in value, but it recovered quickly in the latter half of 2009 following the rollout of a fiscal stimulus of 4 trillion yuan over twenty-seven months—jointly funded by the government and state and nonstate enterprises—which was “equal to three times the size of the United States effort.”⁷ In 2014, by purchasing power parity, China surpassed the United States to become the world's largest economy.⁸ While its extraordinary growth rates have begun to slow, China's trade, investment, and construction now have significant regional and even global influence.

Party Leadership Declares New Priority: “Harmonious Society,” *Washington Post*, October 12, 2006, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/11/AR2006101101610.html>. For more on the concept of the “Chinese dream,” see Xi Jinping, *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages, 2014); Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore, “The Chinese Dream,” *New York Times*, May 3, 2013, available at <http://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/03/whats-xi-jinpings-chinese-dream/>; “China's Future: Xi Jinping and the Chinese Dream,” *The Economist*, May 2, 2013, available at <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21577070-vision-chinas-new-president-should-serve-his-people-not-nationalist-state-xi-jinping>; Robert Lawrence Kuhn, “Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2013, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/opinion/global/xi-jinpings-chinese-dream.html>; and Martin Patience, “What Does Xi Jinping's China Dream Mean?,” *BBC News*, June 6, 2013, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22726375>.

6. National Bureau of Statistics, “Investigative Report on the Monitoring of Chinese Rural Migrant Workers in 2013” [in Chinese], May 12, 2014, available at http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201405/t20140512_551585.html.

7. Christine Wong, “The Fiscal Stimulus Programme and Public Governance Issues in China,” *OECD Journal on Budgeting* 2011, no. 3, (2011): 2–3, available at <http://www.oecd.org/gov/budgeting/49633058.pdf>.

8. International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database*, available at <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2014/02/weodata/index.aspx>.

Supplementing the official statistics with field-research data, this chapter examines the role of local governments in drawing in businesses and investments, as well as the specific conditions of Chinese rural migrant workers' production and reproduction in the contemporary political economy. I document the ways in which aggrieved workers, at times of labor crises, have organized to take legal and extralegal actions to defend their rights and interests autonomously, without the leadership or mobilization of trade unions. What, then, are the prospects for Chinese labor to strengthen its associational power against the backdrop of privatization of state enterprises and the emergence of rural migrant workers at the marginalized center of a new working class? The answer hinges not only on the evolving consciousness and praxis of working people amid changing labor-capital relations but also on the ways in which the state prioritizes worker interests relative to those of international and domestic capital. Provincial governments such as that of Guangdong were compelled to enforce new collective-bargaining regulations to regulate industrial relations, precisely when an increasing number of workers leveraged their power to disrupt production to demand higher pay and better conditions within the tight delivery deadlines. In addition to discussing the significance of workplace-based structural power at key nodes of the global supply base, I conclude by outlining the impact of Chinese demographic changes on the growth of workers' bargaining power in the marketplace.

Chinese Rural Migrant Workers

With China's structural transformation over the past four decades, economic growth has spurred dreams of success from all walks of life. “Wage work in the city,” comments Sally Sargeson, “became the means for self-actualization [of women peasant-migrants] in family and village.”⁹ For nearly all, however, it was transient; many among the first generation of rural migrants drawn to the urban labor market in the 1990s returned to their villages to marry, settle in, and raise children.¹⁰ The returned migrants and their families have access

9. Sally Sargeson, *Reworking China's Proletariat* (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan, 1999), 219.

10. Ching Kwan Lee, *Gender and the South China Miracle: Two Worlds of Factory Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); You-tien Hsing, *Making Capitalism in China: The Taiwan Connection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Delia Davin, *Internal Migration in Contemporary China* (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan, 1999); Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Ngai Pun, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration, and Social Change* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2006); Jaesok Kim, *Chinese Labor in a Korean*

to village-allocated subsistence plots of land. The Rural Land Contracting Law, revised and implemented in March 2003, upholds the “thirty-year no-change rule” to household-contracted farmland for rural people, including those who migrated to work before the law went into effect.

For rural migrants, agricultural land tenure is a form of insurance in the event of layoffs or return to the home village and a basis for subsistence for returned migrants whose access to welfare and retirement benefits remain limited.¹¹ Sporadic efforts toward cooperative rural construction and alternative-development initiatives aside, sustainable farming and lucrative nonfarm work opportunities in the remote countryside are scarce. Following China’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, villagers and farm workers experienced ever more intense market pressures, one of the factors accelerating migration. Despite the elimination of agricultural taxes in 2005 and the extension of local insurance schemes, much of the countryside has remained stagnant, as youth have left en masse for the cities and jobs in industry, construction, and services. Some villagers, including rural migrants, have leased or transferred their land-use rights to boost income. Others, as a result of rural land grabs involving state-capital collusion, have no choice but to search for nonfarm jobs, resulting in windfall profits for cadres and loss of land rights for those who had tilled the land throughout their lives.¹² They become new proletarians in the socialist market economy.

Still, the majority of Chinese rural migrants have experienced “incomplete proletarianization,” in that they possess agricultural land-use rights as a birthright while working for wages as hired laborers to make ends meet.¹³ Poverty-alleviation officials and the All-China Women’s Federation, for example, facilitated labor out-migration in accord with paramount leader Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 call to “let some people get rich first.”¹⁴ The goal was to obtain remittances and assure the development of marketable skills in young migrants while jumpstarting China’s export-oriented industrialization. Rural surplus labor has been channeled to urbanizing

Factory: Class, Ethnicity, and Productivity on the Shop Floor in Globalizing China (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

11. Shaohua Zhan and Lingli Huang, “Rural Roots of Current Migrant Labor Shortage in China: Development and Labor Empowerment in a Situation of Incomplete Proletarianization,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 48 (2013): 81–111; An Chen, “How Has the Abolition of Agricultural Taxes Transformed Village Governance in China? Evidence from Agricultural Regions,” *China Quarterly* 219 (2014): 715–735.

12. Julia Chuang, “China’s Rural Land Politics: Bureaucratic Absorption and the Muting of Rightful Resistance,” *China Quarterly* 219 (2014): 649–669.

13. Ngai Pun and Huilin Lu, “Unfinished Proletarianization: Self, Anger, and Class Action of the Second Generation of Peasant-Workers in Reform China,” *Modern China* 36, no. 5 (2010): 493–519.

14. “Income Distribution in China: To Each According to His Abilities,” *The Economist*, May 31, 2001, available at <http://www.economist.com/node/639652>.

areas through social networks and government development paths. As a Communist Party secretary put it, “We consider migrant labor to be a kind of cooperation between eastern and western parts of the country.”¹⁵ At the turn of the millennium, Beijing leaders attempted to rebalance the economy by initiating the Go West campaign, through which financial and human resources were channeled to underdeveloped central and western provinces.¹⁶ This cohort of migrant workers includes tens of millions who were born, and even have spent their entire lives, in and around cities yet retain “rural household registration” in perpetuity while being denied equal citizenship rights.¹⁷

As market reforms accelerated in the decade of the 1990s and thereafter, the fragmentation of labor and the diversification of ownership in the hands of Chinese and international capital profoundly challenged both workers and trade unions.¹⁸ Many small and medium-sized state firms went bankrupt, were privatized, or were restructured, throwing an estimated thirty-five to sixty million urban workers out of work.¹⁹ The “iron rice bowl” of lifelong job security and accompanying welfare was shattered as state firms reoriented to make profits and cut costs in intensified market competition.²⁰ In recent years, with the consolidation of profit-making state-owned enterprises, China’s industrial system has divided into three segments “consisting of

15. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China*, 71.

16. David S. G. Goodman, “The Campaign to ‘Open Up the West’: National, Provincial-Level and Local Perspectives,” *China Quarterly* 178 (2004): 317–334; Andrew Ross, *Fast Boat to China: Corporate Flight and the Consequences of Free Trade—Lessons from Shanghai* (New York: Pantheon, 2006).

17. For an overview of China’s rural and urban household registration (*hukou*) policy and its recent reform, see Martin King Whyte, ed., *One Country, Two Societies: Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); and Kam Wing Chan, “Achieving Comprehensive *Hukou* Reform in China,” Paulson Institute, December 16, 2014, available at <http://www.paulsoninstitute.org/think-tank/2014/12/16/achieving-comprehensive-hukou-reform-in-china/>.

18. Mary E. Gallagher, *Contagious Capitalism: Globalization and the Politics of Labor in China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Tim Pringle, *Trade Unions in China: The Challenge of Labor Unrest* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011); Eli Friedman, *Insurgency Trap: Labor Politics in Postsocialist China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Eli Friedman and Sarosh Kuruvilla, “Experimentation and Decentralization in China’s Labor Relations,” *Human Relations* 68, no. 2 (2015): 181–195.

19. Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China’s Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Dorothy J. Solinger, *States’ Gains, Labor’s Losses: China, France, and Mexico Choose Global Liaisons, 1980–2000* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); William Hurst, *The Chinese Worker after Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Lu Zhang, *Inside China’s Automobile Factories: The Politics of Labor and Worker Resistance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

20. Sarosh Kuruvilla, Ching Kwan Lee, and Mary E. Gallagher, eds., *From Iron Rice Bowl to Informalization: Markets, Workers, and the State in a Changing China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

large, central-government firms; hybrid local and foreign firms; and small-scale capitalism,"²¹ to which we may add the dominance of gigantic foreign-invested manufacturers that have access to cheap land, labor, and numerous privileges from local governments across China. Corporate management has prioritized labor controls with an emphasis on profit, organizational flexibility, and production efficiency, reconfiguring Chinese industrial relations in the global economy.

The 2013 government survey data clearly showed that China's east coast was still the primary destination for rural migrant workers nationwide but that the most rapid increase in investment and GDP was in the west. As enterprises have built new factories in the hinterland in accord with national policy, the gap in employment has narrowed in central and western China: 162 million rural migrants worked in the eastern region, 57 million in the central region, and 50 million in the western region.²² The young people express a desire to broaden their horizons and experience a modern life and cosmopolitan consumption in megacities such as Shenzhen, Shanghai, and Beijing, as well as in other fast-developing cities in inland provinces. In their own words, we can hear the aspirations of this new generation; however, we can also hear evidence of what Marcuse defined as "repressive desublimation," as heartfelt impulses and authentic longings for a "free and pacified existence" are deformed and repressively molded into the reified categories of a one-dimensional consumerist discourse.²³ For instance, a woman migrant worker in Beijing commented, "If I had to live the life that my mother has lived, I would choose suicide."²⁴ Growing corn and wheat on tiny parcels of land and keeping a few pigs and chickens may not leave her hungry, but getting ahead and moving upward is nearly impossible if one seeks to eke out a living on the small family plot. The young generations have their eyes firmly on the cities. "Birds, don't be silly, no one cares whether you're tired from flying, people only care how high you fly," mused a nineteen-year-old migrant working girl.²⁵ Coming from a village in central China, she hoped to secure a better life for her mother and herself in Shanghai. While large companies are manufacturing rosy dreams

21. Barry Naughton, "China's Distinctive System: Can It Be a Model for Others?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 65 (2010): 441.

22. National Bureau of Statistics, "A Graphical Illustration of the Chinese Rural Migrant Workers in 2013" [in Chinese], May 12, 2014, available at http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201405/t20140512_551634.html.

23. Herbert Marcuse, "The Conquest of the Unhappy Consciousness: Repressive Desublimation," in Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 56–83; Herbert Marcuse, "The Catastrophe of Liberation," in Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 231.

24. Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 25.

25. Jenny Chan, "Who Speaks for China's Workers?" *Labor Notes*, May 29, 2013, available at <http://www.labornotes.org/blogs/2013/05/who-speaks-china%E2%80%99s-workers>.

of entrepreneurial success for the dreamers, low-wage migrant workers face a reality of unjust conditions in the workplace and acute problems in a society characterized by soaring income gaps;²⁶ environmental degradation; and the commodification of social services, housing, education, and medical care.²⁷

The Chinese State, Labor, and Capital

The government recognizes the only official union organization, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), and its branches across all levels. In the three years from 1997 to 2000 alone, the union bureaucracy, whose strength had been centered in state-owned enterprises, lost at least seventeen million members in the wave of privatization or corporate restructuring.²⁸ Many newly founded enterprises ignored official guidelines to establish unions. In response, the ACFTU has targeted large foreign-invested companies such as Foxconn²⁹ and Walmart to unionize. As of December 2009, "unions had been set up in 92 percent of the Fortune 500 companies

26. The latest data for 2013 indicate that China's Gini is 0.47 (internationally, a Gini coefficient of 0.4 or above is considered high)—a level comparable to that of Nigeria and slightly higher than that of the United States (0.45), where income inequality has also risen steadily over decades. "Inequality: Gini Out of the Bottle," *The Economist*, January 26, 2013, available at <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21570749-gini-out-bottle>.

27. Deborah S. Davis and Wang Feng, eds., *Creating Wealth and Poverty in Postsocialist China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Martin King Whyte, "Soaring Income Gaps: China in Comparative Perspective," *Daedalus: the Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 143, no. 2 (2014): 39–52; Shi Li and Terry Sicular, "The Distribution of Household Income in China: Inequality, Poverty and Policies," *China Quarterly* 217 (2014): 1–41; John Knight, "Inequality in China: An Overview," *World Bank Research Observer* 29, no. 1 (2014): 1–19.

28. Rudolf Traub-Merz, "All China Federation of Trade Unions: Structure, Functions and the Challenge of Collective Bargaining," in *Industrial Democracy in China: With Additional Studies on Germany, South-Korea and Vietnam*, ed. Rudolf Traub-Merz and Kinglun Ngok (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2012), 11–51, available at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/china/09128/09128-english%20version.pdf>.

29. Foxconn Technology Group (a.k.a. Hon Hai Precision Industry Company) was founded in Taipei, Taiwan, in 1974 and incorporated in Shenzhen, China, in 1988. By 2004, Foxconn had become China's largest employer, and it currently has more than one million employees. Adam Pick, "Foxconn Takes Number-One Rank in EMS," *EMS Now*, May 30, 2006, available at <http://www.emsnow.com/npps/story.cfm?ID=19523>; IHS Technology, "Foxconn Rides Partnership with Apple to Take 50 Percent of EMS [Electronics Manufacturing Services] Market in 2011," July 27, 2010, available at <http://www.isuppli.com/Manufacturing-and-Pricing/News/Pages/Foxconn-Rides-Partnership-with-Apple-to-Take-50-Percent-of-EMS-Market-in-2011.aspx>. "Foxconn is China's largest private-sector employer, and its activities have turned the coastal town of Shenzhen into the electronics workshop of the world." Juliette Garside, "Apple's Factories in China Are Breaking Employment Laws, Audit Finds," *The Guardian*, March 29, 2012, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2012/mar/30/apple-factories-china-foxconn-audit>.

operating in China,” and this trend has continued since.³⁰ By 2012, the centralized Chinese trade-union organization claimed a total membership of 258 million nationwide³¹—surpassing the International Trade Union Confederation global membership of 176 million workers in 161 countries and territories excluding China. Among Chinese union members, 36 percent (94 million) were rural migrant workers, the fastest growing segment of the union and the labor force since the early 2000s.³² The number of union members is impressive, but from the purpose of serving worker interests, we may ask: To what end?

Fieldwork has generated information about the response of Foxconn Trade Union—China’s largest industrial union, with more than one million members—to the tragedy of employee suicides. Foxconn shocked the world when the “twelve leaps,” the suicides of young rural migrant workers who leaped from factory dormitories in Shenzhen city, took place during the first five months of 2010.³³ Foxconn union chairwoman Chen Peng, special assistant to CEO Terry Gou, not only failed to investigate the workplace factors responsible for worker depression but also made insensitive public comments, including “Suicide is foolish, irresponsible and meaningless and should be avoided.”³⁴ Here, dominant capital reacted precisely as theorized by Marcuse: “In terms of the establishment and in terms of the rationality of the establishment, such behavior would and must appear as foolish, childish and irrational.”³⁵ Not unlike their peers in other workplaces, and perhaps in an extreme form, the million-strong Foxconn workers are not collectively represented in a meaningful way.

30. Mingwei Liu, “Where There Are Workers, There Should Be Trade Unions: Union Organizing in the Era of Growing Informal Employment,” in Kuruvilla, Lee, and Gallagher, *From Iron Rice Bowl to Informalization*, 157.

31. *China Labor Statistical Yearbook 2012* [in Chinese] (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 2013), 405–406.

32. “20% of Chinese Join Trade Unions,” *China Daily*, January 7, 2012, available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-01/07/content_14400312.htm.

33. Jenny Chan and Ngai Pun, “Suicide as Protest for the New Generation of Chinese Migrant Workers: Foxconn, Global Capital, and the State,” *Asia-Pacific Journal*, September 13, 2010, available at <http://japanfocus.org/-Jenny-Chan/3408>; Ngai Pun and Jenny Chan, “Global Capital, the State, and Chinese Workers: The Foxconn Experience,” *Modern China* 38, no. 4 (2012): 383–410; Ngai Pun and Jenny Chan, “The Spatial Politics of Labor in China: Life, Labor, and a New Generation of Migrant Workers,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 1 (2013): 179–190; Jenny Chan, “A Suicide Survivor: The Life of a Chinese Worker,” *New Technology, Worker and Employment* 28, no. 2 (2013): 84–99; Ngai Pun, Yuan Shen, Yuhua Guo, Huilin Lu, Jenny Chan, and Mark Selden, “Worker-Intellectual Unity: Trans-border Sociological Intervention in Foxconn,” *Current Sociology* 62, no. 2 (2014): 209–222.

34. Jia Xu, “Foxconn Rallies to End Suicides by Workers,” *China Daily*, August 19, 2010.

35. Herbert Marcuse, “On the New Left,” in *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol. 3, *The New Left and the 1960s*, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 2004), 125.

The dependence of the unions on management, as well as the limits on their activity posed by the party-state, severely undermines the capacity of enterprise unions to represent the workers.³⁶ In the words of Anita Chan, the unions are “an integral part of factory management” and “worse than weak.”³⁷ Five years on, in February 2015, ACFTU legal department head Guo Jun criticized Foxconn, among other companies, for imposing illegal overtime of “more than ten hours every day” on workers, in some cases resulting in “deaths and suicides.”³⁸ But the practice of compulsory, excessive overtime work on this scale was well known to government leaders throughout the years. If the central-level union staff were really interested in building harmonious labor relations, they failed to reform the management-dominated unions at Foxconn,³⁹ Walmart,⁴⁰ and other firms.

In the face of rising labor protests, China’s leaders have sought to legitimize governance and to stabilize production by initiating a series of legal reforms. Between 1978 and 1995, forty-nine labor laws and regulations were enacted, including the national Labor Law, which came into force on January 1, 1995.⁴¹ The provisions of a written employment contract, minimum wages, overtime premiums, rest days, occupational health and safety, and social benefits—under the promotion of the “rule of law”—have inspired citizens to file claims through fast-expanding labor-dispute arbitration committees and courts.⁴² As the state seeks to channel labor conflict away from the street, Ching Kwan Lee observes that “the law has become the pivotal

36. Feng Chen, “Union Power in China: Source, Operation, and Constraints,” *Modern China* 35, no. 6 (2009): 662–689.

37. Anita Chan, “Strikes in China’s Export Industries in Comparative Perspective,” *China Journal* 65 (2011): 42.

38. Zhang Xiang, “Foxconn’s Long Hours Causing Workers’ Deaths: Union,” *China Daily*, February 3, 2015, available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-02/03/content_19477082.htm.

39. Nicki Lisa Cole and Jenny Chan, “Despite Claims of Progress, Labor and Environmental Violations Continue to Plague Apple,” *Truthout*, February 19, 2015, available at <http://truth-out.org/news/item/29180-despite-claims-of-progress-labor-violations-and-environmental-atrocities-continue-to-plague-apple-s-supply-chain>.

40. Anita Chan, ed., *Walmart in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

41. Isabelle Thireau and Linshan Hua, “The Moral Universe of Aggrieved Chinese Workers: Workers’ Appeals to Arbitration Committees and Letters and Visits Offices,” *China Journal* 50 (2003): 83–103.

42. Neil J. Diamant, Stanley B. Lubman, and Kevin J. O’Brien, eds., *Engaging the Law in China: State, Society, and Possibilities for Justice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Kinglun Ngok, “The Changes of Chinese Labor Policy and Labor History in the Context of Market Transition,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 73 (2008): 45–64; Margaret Y. K. Woo and Mary E. Gallagher, eds., *Chinese Justice: Civil Dispute Resolution in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

terrain of labor politics.⁴³ Aggrieved workers “mobilize the law” by quoting specific clauses of legal protection when their rights are violated.

Arbitration committees are grassroots state organizations that bring together labor and management to resolve labor conflicts. In 1993, China’s State Council promulgated Regulations on the Handling of Enterprise Labor Disputes, enabling employees of all kinds of enterprises to raise complaints to local labor dispute arbitration committees. The significance was that while the 1987 Provisional Regulations on the Handling of Enterprise Labor Disputes in State Enterprises stipulated the rights to arbitration by state employees only, the 1993 regulations for the first time granted workers in private and foreign-invested firms, the majority of whom are rural migrants, equal access to arbitration.⁴⁴ Effective May 1, 2008, the Labor Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Law made arbitration free of charge for all parties and extended the statute of limitations for filing cases from sixty days to one year, thereby encouraging workers to bring their cases to arbitration. Unpaid workers were the greatest beneficiaries of extending the time limit for filing claims.⁴⁵ But not all incidents of labor disputes fall within the domain of arbitration and the courts. Workers know that government arbitrators do not accept demands such as those for wage increases above the legal minimum.

Labor disputes submitted for arbitration and litigation have spiraled since the mid-1990s, paralleling the rising number of worker protests. Official statistics for 1996 show that 48,121 labor disputes were accepted for arbitration, and the total increased to 120,191 in 1999, involving more than 470,000 laborers in the context of massive layoffs of state sector workers. The upward trend continued from the year 2000, reflecting widespread incidences of rights violations as the nonstate and restructured state sector expanded. Labor cases further skyrocketed to 693,465, involving more than 1.2 million laborers nationwide in the economic crisis of 2008. Following the economic recovery and government intervention, newly accepted arbitration cases fell to 600,865 in 2010 and further to 589,244 in 2011. In 2012, however, the total number of labor-dispute cases rebounded (641,202), despite greater

responsiveness on the part of the government and its trade union offices to resolve conflicts.⁴⁶

Research in 2009–2011 found that disgruntled workers again and again rejected arbitration decisions and appealed to higher courts when they perceived arbitrators’ awards to be significantly below what they believed the labor law guaranteed them.⁴⁷ Within fifteen days of an arbitration ruling, workers have a right to apply for a trial of the original dispute. Such appeals have become increasingly common. If either side is dissatisfied with the verdict, it can appeal to a higher court, where a second trial is final.

Notwithstanding important legal reforms, the state-capital nexus is powerful even as specific worker grievances surface in lawsuits. Chinese governments at all levels have fostered a “flexible” labor regime wherein rules and regulations are bent to the investors’ advantage. It is observed that employers systematically “ignored the law with impunity because of the lack of effective implementation and enforcement by local regulatory or supervisory organizations, including the trade union, the local labor bureau and the courts.”⁴⁸ China, in furthering its integration into the capitalist global economy, has chosen to accumulate wealth and pursue high-speed growth at the expense of socialist goals, notably the quest for social equality and shared prosperity. The nature of the Chinese state has radically changed, with officials and elites turning a blind eye to violations of law, as if labor abuses are inevitable (if not always acceptable at all times) in the course of economic transformation.⁴⁹ While progressive reforms of national laws and related legal institutions are necessary in basic labor protection, huge discrepancies exist between workers’ employment rights in formal law and the actual enforcement of these rights. Negotiations over wages and benefits, for example, remain contested and fraught.

Outside of state-sanctioned dispute-resolution paths, Chinese workers have also taken direct action to advance their rights and interests. The oscillation between legal and extralegal avenues has fueled activism by some, but others have become depressed and embittered. Such a wide range of responses and dispositions is arguably typical of any long-term struggle against hegemonic power; however, the key point is that continued resistance

43. Ching Kwan Lee, “Pathways of Labor Activism,” in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, ed. Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden (London: Routledge, 2010), 76.

44. Virginia E. Harper Ho, *Labor Dispute Resolution in China: Implications for Labor Rights and Legal Reform* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2003).

45. Jenny Chan, “Meaningful Progress or Illusory Reform? Analysing China’s Labor Contract Law,” *New Labor Forum* 18, no. 2 (2009): 43–51; Mary E. Gallagher, John Giles, Albert Park, and Meiyang Wang, “China’s 2008 Labor Contract Law: Implementation and Implications for China’s Workers,” *Human Relations* 68, no. 2 (2015): 197–235.

46. *China Labor Statistical Yearbook 2013* [in Chinese] (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 2014), 348–349.

47. Feng Chen and Xin Xu, “‘Active Judiciary’: Judicial Dismantling of Workers’ Collective Action in China,” *China Journal* 67 (2012): 87–107.

48. Mary Gallagher and Baohua Dong, “Legislating Harmony: Labor Law Reform in Contemporary China,” in Kuruvilla, Lee, and Gallagher, *From Iron Rice Bowl to Informalization*, 44.

49. Dorothy J. Solinger, *States’ Gains, Labor’s Losses: China, France, and Mexico Choose Global Liaisons, 1980–2000* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

by workers may inspire and catalyze new forms of consciousness and organization, opening possibilities for social and economic alternatives.

Challenges, Reforms, and Worker Resistance

Laborers' right to strike was recognized in China's constitution in 1975 and 1978, only to be revoked in 1982 and in subsequent constitutions. But this legislative change has not stopped workers from going on strike. Labor unrest has been growing, fueled in part by a younger and better-educated cohort of workers⁵⁰ who are less tolerant of injustice and highly motivated to demand higher wages and better benefits.⁵¹ They understand that they stand at a strategically key node of production, with the integration of large manufacturers heavily dependent on transnational supply chains, just-in-time production strategies, and tight delivery schedules for consumer products precisely timed to holiday seasons and new product launch dates. This awareness potentially enhances their bargaining power and increasingly empowers workers to schedule concerted actions at times for maximum impact and leverage.⁵²

In these times of crisis and the upsurge of "emergent sentiments of collective identity,"⁵³ when discontents are shared and articulated, workers have undertaken joint actions to secure their rights and interests. These acts of refusal have taken many forms, including the following:

- Strikes
- Slowdowns while on the job
- Coordinated absenteeism
- Protests and demonstrations (including sit-ins and rallies)

50. As of 2013, 46.6 percent of those classified as rural migrant workers were born after 1980, and the majority (60.6 percent) of these young people had completed nine years of formal education. An additional 20.5 percent are high-school graduates. National Bureau of Statistics, "Investigative Report."

51. Jeffrey Becker, *Social Ties, Resources, and Migrant Labor Contention in Contemporary China: From Peasants to Protestors* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2014); Manfred Elfstrom and Sarosh Kuruvilla, "The Changing Nature of Labor Unrest in China," *ILR Review* 67, no. 2 (2014): 453–480; Daniel Y. Zipp and Marc Blecher, "Migrants and Mobilization: Sectoral Patterns in China, 2010–2013," *Global Labour Journal* 6, no. 1 (2015): 116–126, available at <https://escarpmentpress.org/globalabour/article/view/2293/2356>.

52. Jenny Chan, Ngai Pun, and Mark Selden, "The Politics of Global Production: Apple, Foxconn, and China's New Working Class," *New Technology, Work and Employment* 28, no. 2 (2013): 100–115; Jenny Chan, Ngai Pun, and Mark Selden, "Apple's iPad City: Subcontracting Exploitation to China," in *Handbook of the International Political Economy of Production*, ed. Kees van der Pijl (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2015), 76–97.

53. Michael Mann, *Consciousness and Action among the Western Working Class* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 50.

- Blockage of highways or main bridges (to pressure local officials to mediate disputes on the scene—turning "streets into courtrooms")
- Riots (burning police cars, damaging targeted government buildings or factory properties)
- Petitions to government offices (again, to pressure officials to speed up settlement, instead of going through time-consuming bureaucratic procedures such as filing individual or collective lawsuits with arbitration committees)
- Social-media campaigns to disseminate open letters, to garner support, and to tweet in emergency situations
- Suicides (including threats of mass suicides)
- Murder (killing factory bosses in revenge, particularly in cases of severe industrial injuries and nonpayment of wages)
- Other kinds of violence (physical assault and abuses)

Many such actions to date have been short-lived and mostly confined to single workplaces, without workers forming broader alliances across geographical regions; however, a significant feature of such resistance is that workers have acquired organizing and communication skills in and through successive struggles. Interestingly, Marcuse stressed the emancipatory potential of a resistance that is "diffused, concentrated in small groups and around local activities, [as] small groups . . . are highly flexible and autonomous."⁵⁴ Two workplace-based protests in South China are evidence of how workers, management, and the local state have reacted to explosive moments of class tensions.

Under Chinese labor law, employers are legally required to provide five types of social insurance—old-age pensions, medical insurance, work-injury insurance, unemployment benefits, and maternity insurance—but the vast majority of workers classified as rural migrants lack rudimentary coverage of such benefits. According to the latest statistics, in 2013, the government estimated that only 28.5 percent of 166 million rural migrant workers were covered by work-injury insurance, 17.6 percent had medical insurance, 15.7 percent had old-age pensions, 9.1 percent had unemployment benefits, and 6.6 percent had maternity insurance.⁵⁵ A significant example of worker protest erupted in spring 2014, involving more than forty thousand workers from all production departments at the world's largest footwear supplier, the Taiwanese-owned Yue Yuen Industrial (Holdings) Ltd. in Dongguan, Guangdong Province, whose sneakers are sold to Nike, Adidas, Timberland,

54. Marcuse, "On the New Left," 126.

55. National Bureau of Statistics, "Investigative Report."

and other global brands.⁵⁶ Workers demanded employment benefits that the company had denied them. When worker-management negotiations broke down, a factory-wide strike closed the plant between April 14 and 25, compelling government officials to mediate the disputes onsite. On May 1, Yue Yuen corporate executives—under pressure from stability-obsessed, higher-level officials—promised to provide insurance premiums in accordance with the workers' current wages. The company refused, however, to pay the "historical debts"—that is, the unpaid welfare benefits owed to employees for previous work. In the absence of strong pro-labor government support for the full set of demands, workers accepted the partial victory and returned to work.

If large-scale strikes such as that at Yue Yuen sometimes win victories, the question remains whether workers in smaller workshops can secure the fundamental rights to collective bargaining and effective representation in the face of unified action by capital, the company unions, and the local state. In Marcusean terms, the workers struggle against the combined forces of the "one-dimensional" universe.

In May and early June 2010, 1,800 workers at Honda, including "student interns," participated in an on-and-off factory-wide strike to demand an 800-yuan-per-month pay raise in Nanhai District, Guangdong. Companies are increasingly facing pressure to raise wages and improve conditions to retain workers, particularly a young cohort, who frequently change jobs in an attempt to get higher pay and benefits.⁵⁷ The Honda worker representatives also insisted on reforming their union.⁵⁸ Bargaining by workers' direct actions, in the form of strikes or otherwise, has been and remains a viable way to address workers' shared grievances. The official slogan of the ACFTU is "When there's trouble, seek the trade union." Worker leaders, again and again, only found company unions unresponsive to their plight. In August 2010, Kong Xianghong, vice-chair of the Guangdong Federation of Trade Unions, presided over the direct election of shop-floor union representatives and subsequent collective wage bargaining in 2011. Many workers were disappointed, however, that the discredited factory union chair was permitted

56. Jenny Chan and Mark Selden, "China's Rural Migrant Workers, the State, and Labor Politics," *Critical Asian Studies* 46, no. 4 (2014): 599–620.

57. Equally important, state efforts to boost incomes between 2008 and 2012 led to average annual increases in statutory minimum wages of 12.6 percent. "China Initiates New Round of Minimum Wage Increases," *China Briefing*, January 4, 2013, available at <http://www.china-briefing.com/news/2013/01/04/china-initiates-new-round-of-minimum-wage-increases.html>.

58. Florian Butollo and Tobias ten Brink, "Challenging the Atomization of Discontent: Patterns of Migrant-Worker Protest in China During the Series of Strikes in 2010," *Critical Asian Studies* 44, no. 3 (2012): 419–440; Dave Lyddon, Xuebing Cao, Quan Meng, and Jun Lu, "A Strike of 'Unorganised' Workers in a Chinese Car Factory: The Nanhai Honda Events of 2010," *Industrial Relations Journal* 46, no. 2 (2015): 134–152.

to remain as head of a partially reformed union and the two "elected" vice-chairs were top-level managers, reflecting continued managerial control. Moreover, while the company was forced to yield on the important wage issue (namely, it agreed to an overall increase of 500 yuan for workers and underpaid student interns) under pressure from the provincial trade union to restore industrial and political peace, it was able to ignore all other worker demands, including those for women's rights and improved welfare benefits (paid maternity leave and a one-hour meal break among them). As a result, the union committee quickly lost the confidence of rank-and-file workers.

Worker solidarity frequently dissipated when leaders were intimidated, arrested, or bought off or when state-brokered settlements provided workers with limited gains while leaving the power structure and fundamental patterns of inequity and injustice intact.⁵⁹ Tim Pringle, in assessing the future of Chinese union reforms in light of growing labor challenges, stresses the need not only for "more accountable enterprise-level union chairpersons and committees" but "more supportive, interactive and, at times, directive relationships between the higher trade unions and their enterprise-level subordinates."⁶⁰ To maintain governance legitimacy, the state continues to search for mechanisms for resolving labor conflicts and managing social discontents while simultaneously embracing development policies that subject the society to the deep structural problems of global capitalism.

Toward Radical Subjectivity and Institutional Change?

In opposing their factory bosses and management-controlled unions, worker consciousness is being heightened, possibly constituting (together with other developments) preconditions for the formation of radical subjectivity, with which workers can build power to seek significant social, political, and economic changes. Utilizing Marcuse's perspective, one might see in these refusals the "disintegration of [a repressive] work morality" that "threatens to become a material force which endangers the smooth functioning of the system."⁶¹ At present, however, workers face numerous obstacles in building their movements. Under decentralization, regional competition to secure and hold foreign investment in their domains—across the coastal provinces and between the interior regions—is very intense. The state-society relationships are contentious, requiring ever more legislative efforts, media advocacy, and direct involvement in labor management by government officials.

59. Xi Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

60. Tim Pringle, *Trade Unions in China* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 162.

61. Herbert Marcuse, "A Conversation with Hans Magnus Enzensberger," in *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol. 3, *The New Left and the 1960s*, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 2004), 141.

In October 2013, the Guangdong Provincial People's Congress released for public discussion its "Regulations on Enterprise Collective Consultations and Collective Contracts (Revised Draft)."⁶² The goal was to establish an effective negotiation system that would harmonize labor relations or, to put it directly, reduce the incidence of strikes. This document also suggests the possibility that a directly elected union leadership could emerge within a party-state-led model of dispute mediation and unionization in the workplace.⁶³ In response to strong opposition from major business associations, the provincial government weakened the critical provisions and on September 25, 2014, passed Regulations on Enterprise Collective Contracts in Guangdong, effective January 1, 2015. Article 18 stipulates that over 50 percent of the workforce must endorse the formal call for compulsory talks to take place, a formidable obstacle to worker actions. Even if negotiations do happen, Article 24 prohibits workers from engaging in a work stoppage or slowdown.⁶⁴ Under such circumstances, as Marcuse points out, state directives constitute an orchestrated attempt to contain workers' dissatisfaction within the repressive institutions of the status quo. In actual labor-capital-state contests, the long-term effect of the regulations on workers' power is to be carefully observed.⁶⁵

Above all, Mary Gallagher characterizes "the activist state" in which the Chinese government "has struggled to maintain its labor system through more direct management of labor disputes."⁶⁶ Time and again, settlement of high-profile worker protests through direct government mediation is undertaken to quickly restore "social stability."⁶⁷ Indeed, officials have skillfully developed a wide array of "protest absorption" techniques to resolve labor disputes at the scene with the goal to maintain sociopolitical stability, such as redefining workers' "realistic expectation" and thereby lowering their

62. Standing Committee of Guangdong Provincial People's Congress, "Regulations on Enterprise Collective Consultations and Collective Contracts in Guangdong (Revised Draft)" [in Chinese], October 11, 2013, available at http://www.rd.gd.cn/rdgzxgnr/ficzjyj/201310/t20131011_136865.html.

63. Chris King-chi Chan and Elaine Sio-ieng Hui, "The Development of Collective Bargaining in China: From 'Collective Bargaining by Riot' to 'Party State-Led Wage Bargaining,'" *China Quarterly* 217 (2014): 221–242.

64. Standing Committee of Guangdong Provincial People's Congress, "Regulations on Enterprise Collective Contracts in Guangdong" [in Chinese], September 28, 2014, available at http://www.gdrc.cn/gdrdfb/ggtz/201409/t20140928_142698.html.

65. For an early bleak assessment of the Guangdong regulations, see Aaron Halegua, "China's New Collective Bargaining Rule Is Too Weak to Ease Labour Conflicts," *South China Morning Post*, February 25, 2015, available at <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1723213/chinas-new-collective-bargaining-rule-too-weak-ease-labour>.

66. Mary E. Gallagher, "China's Workers Movement and the End of the Rapid-Growth Era," *Daedalus: The Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 143, no. 2 (2014): 87.

67. Benjamin L. Liebman, "Legal Reform: China's Law-Stability Paradox," *Daedalus: The Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 143, no. 2 (2014): 97.

claims to lawful compensation. At the same time, government representatives move to pressure management to grant some economic concessions to the most adversely affected workers and simultaneously manipulate workers' familial and social relations to silence the resistance.⁶⁸ The immediate result is that in many cases, workers' individual grievances are partially addressed and collective actions broken up. As China's officials make extensive use of their discretionary power, and spent as much as 769.1 billion yuan on "stability maintenance" in 2013 (which exceeded the total annual military budget),⁶⁹ rather than enabling workers to exercise their fundamental rights to freedom of association, it is unclear how long this government interventionist strategy will remain viable, particularly when workers' basic rights and interests are routinely violated.

Workplace suicide is understood as one extreme form of labor protest chosen by some to expose an intolerable and oppressive production regime in which rural migrant workers are deprived of dignified work and life, but many are organizing autonomous groups—bypassing the company trade unions—to engage in a wide range of protests and other refusals. Such bypassing mirrors the processes Marcuse observed in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s when he noted "the resistance of the rank and file workers to the union misleaders."⁷⁰ In recent years, union revitalization and labor insurgency in the Americas and in the Global South, however limited their successes, has increasingly drawn scholarly attention.⁷¹ In today's China, at the heart of the world's factory, young workers seek redress of immediate grievances but also wide-ranging changes of policy and practice

68. Yang Su and Xin He, "Street as Courtroom: State Accommodation of Labor Protest in South China," *Law and Society Review* 44, no. 1 (2010): 157–184; Yanhua Deng and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Relational Repression in China: Using Social Ties to Demobilize Protesters," *China Quarterly* 215 (2013): 533–552; Ching Kwan Lee and Yonghong Zhang, "The Power of Instability: Unraveling the Microfoundations of Bargained Authoritarianism in China," *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no. 6 (2013): 1475–1508; Ching Kwan Lee, "State and Social Protest," *Daedalus: The Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 143, no. 2 (2014): 124–134.

69. Michael Martina, "China Withholds Full Domestic-Security Spending Figure," *Reuters*, March 4, 2014, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/05/us-china-parliament-security-idUSBREA240B720140305>. For the 2015 annual sessions of the National People's Congress (NPC) and National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), see <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2015lh/>.

70. Herbert Marcuse, "Correspondence with Rudi Dutschke," in *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol. 6, *Marxism, Revolution and Utopia*, ed. Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce (New York: Routledge, 2014), 335.

71. Abigail Cooke, Taekyoon Lim, Peter Norlander, Elena Shih, and Chris Tilly, "Introduction to the Special Issue: Labor in the Global South—A Search for Solutions," *Journal of Workplace Rights* 15, nos. 3–4 (2011): 293–301; Rina Agarwala, Jenny Chan, Alexander Gallas, and Ben Scully, "Editors' Introduction," *Global Labour Journal* 6, no. 1 (2015): 1–3, available at <https://escarpmentpress.org/global labour/article/view/2480/2347>.

by industry and government amid the deep tensions being played out in global production. In unprecedented ways, tens of thousands of workers have participated in collective refusals as China further integrates into the global capitalist system.

Conclusion

China's rise could not have occurred without the painstaking efforts and hard labor of rural migrant workers. They have built new Chinese industrial cities and made the products demanded in global markets. In the process, these workers have enriched capital and the state; however, through their common experience of exploitation and with new technological and social knowledge, they have fought back for fair treatment, dignity, and a better life. With much at stake for working people, capital, and the state, struggles—from below and above—are likely to continue amid rapidly changing contexts.

Demographic changes have slowed the growth of the working-age population at a time of general aging,⁷² and all indicators suggest a reduction in the labor supply in coming decades, potentially increasing the marketplace bargaining power of workers.⁷³ As economic activities are expanding outside of China's coastal cities, a substantial workforce is now being recruited within inland regions, and many migrant workers are being sent back from urban centers to their home provinces, in some cases close to their hometowns, where they may draw on local social networks for support—not only for daily life but perhaps also in renewed struggles for fairness and justice with profit-maximizing corporations, the official trade-union establishment, and a powerful state apparatus. With a greater sense of entitlement associated with belonging to a place, and perhaps greater social resources to bring to the fight for their interests (regarding wages, reduced work time for family

72. Two sets of demographic data are particularly relevant. First, Chinese fertility is presently 1.6 children per woman, down from more than 6 children in the 1950s and 2.5 in the 1980s. The number of laborers aged twenty to twenty-four is projected to decline from 125 million in 2010 to approximately 80 million in 2020. Baochang Gu and Yong Cai, "Fertility Prospects in China," United Nations Population Division Expert Paper No. 2011/14, 2011, available at http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/expertpapers/2011-14_Gu&Cai_Expert-paper.pdf. Second, China's 2010 Population Census, moreover, showed that the zero-to-fourteen age group comprised 16.6 percent of total population, down 6.3 percent compared with the 2000 census data. National Bureau of Statistics, "Press Release on Major Figures of the 2010 National Population Census," April 28, 2011, available at http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/NewsEvents/201104/t20110428_26448.html.

73. Karen Eggleston, Jean C. Oi, Scott Rozelle, Ang Sun, Andrew Walder, and Xueguang Zhou, "Will Demographic Change Slow China's Rise?," *Journal of Asian Studies* 72, no. 3 (2013): 505–518; Deborah S. Davis, "Demographic Challenges for a Rising China," *Daedalus: The Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 143, no. 2 (2014): 26–38.

and a balanced life, benefits, working conditions, job tenure and security, public health, environmental quality, housing, education, and the full range of citizenship rights in the places where they live *and* work), the result may be enhanced working-class power in factories and local communities.⁷⁴

We observe that young workers (women and men) have expectations regarding consumption that make them vulnerable to co-optation by a capital-state alliance diversifying its economy to generate and meet rising consumer demands. "Realize the great Chinese dream, build a harmonious society," reads a government banner. The definition of that dream and the determination of who may claim it are at stake in the contemporary struggles of rural migrant workers. Will the current period of protest in localized sites of resistance across China develop further through alliances across class lines and across the urban-rural divide into a more broadly based social movement, against the backdrop of rapid industrialization and capital relocation? Will the demands and visions of discontented workers—and the responses and initiatives of capital and the state—generate revolutionary, reformist, or reactionary conditions? To a significant extent, the answers—and the future of China and global capitalism—depend on the evolving consciousness and praxis of the new generation of rural migrant workers.

74. Eli Friedman, "China in Revolt," *Jacobin*, nos. 7–8 (2012), available at <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2012/08/china-in-revolt/>.

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