

*Informal Strike Organization in South China: The Worker Representative Mechanism, Sustained Leadership, and Strike Outcomes**

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Abstract

In contrast to the workers who organize strikes in the West, Chinese workers lack support from official unions and have to rely on informal ways to strike. The previous literature suggests that worker-leaders have played a role in initiating wildcat strikes, and the engagement of labor NGOs has also facilitated grassroots activism. The focus of previous studies has been on the emergence, approaches, and strategies of the actors involved in different labor protests. However, we still know little about the direct or unintended consequences of the numerous strikes in South China. Based on fieldwork in the Pearl River Delta, this article explores how the informal strike organization built by workers, namely the “worker representative mechanism,” contributes to favorable outcomes for labor. By conducting a comparative case study, this article identifies two important factors that have impacted strike outcomes: how this mechanism builds up a wider representation when the union

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is absent and how it sustains its core leadership for successive strikes and accomplishment of strike goals. By examining how workers build the representative mechanism that, in practice, acts as an informal strike organization, this article illustrates an alternative pattern of organization in strikes that bypasses trade unions and discusses its influences on emerging Chinese labor activism.

The past two decades have witnessed many substantial strikes initiated by migrant workers in southern China. Compared with their counterparts in Western countries, Chinese workers are less likely to rely on trade unions to organize strikes and to carry out collective bargaining. Though they lack effective institutional support, Chinese migrant workers are capable of acting independently to stage forceful collective actions, bypassing the official unions. In the existing literature on the Chinese labor movement, scholars have thoroughly examined institutional settings, from the official trade union embedded in the authoritarian regime to the enforcement of labor laws, policies, and dispute resolution system.¹ The individual-level working conditions, labor processes, and everyday grassroots resistance have also been placed under the academic spotlight.² More recently, scholars have examined the role of labor NGOs in the labor movement, detailing their emergence, their evolutionary path, their function of delivering services, and even their active engagement in advocating for collective rights.³ The focus of these studies has been the emergence, evolution, approaches, and strategies of different actors involved in the strikes, but scant attention has been paid to the consequences of labor protests. This is not only because Chinese industrial workers do not have a strong labor union to form an organized labor movement but also due to the lack of beneficial outcomes that result from this kind of investigation. Therefore, the analysis of labor movement outcomes has been largely ignored by researchers up to this point.

Evidence from my fieldwork in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region between 2013 and 2015 shows that recent strikes and protests are no longer spontaneous but ones that striking workers have initiated with a more or less formalized organizational structure. This article explores how, even in the absence of official unions, Chinese workers are able to achieve success in an informal way by building their own strike organizations. Studies on social movements show that movement outcomes are