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工会

Trade Union

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Despite Lenin's preliminary misgivings about trade unions as bulwarks of economic conservatism only concerned with improving labour conditions under capitalism, he also saw them as sites of revolutionary potentiality, akin to tinder across which the Bolshevik message could be ignited and spread. After the October Revolution, Lenin considered trade unions to be 'an indispensable "school of communism" and a preparatory school that trains proletarians to exercise their dictatorship, an indispensable organisation of the workers for the gradual transfer of the management of the whole economic life of the country to the working *class* (and not to separate trades), and later to all the working people.'¹ Still, Lenin's enduring distrust of trade union's spontaneous and 'conservative tendencies toward economic demands' carried over from the revolutionary era to postrevolutionary governance. Unions could not be trusted to act on their own. They were powerful bodies without a head to guide them. For this reason, in his early writings from the prerevolutionary period, he demanded that all Party members be active in the unions, seeking to influence their membership.² After the establishment of the Soviet Union, he further argued that the proletarian dictatorship 'cannot work without a number of "transmission belts" running from the vanguard to the mass of the advanced class, and from the latter to the mass of the working people.'³

As a transmission belt, the Leninist union was supposed to convey the directives of the Party leadership to the workers, and feed the opinions and reactions of the latter to the Party, implying a circular movement that stands in marked contrast with the linearity of production lines. One century later, this canonical interpretation of Lenin's words remains crucial to understanding the role of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU, *zhonghua quanguo zonggonghui*), the only union legally allowed to exist in China. To this day, the ACFTU—which currently has more than 300 million members—remains structured according to the Leninist principle of 'democratic

centralism' and continues to function as a transmission belt between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the workers. The current leadership of the CCP has made abundantly clear that it does not intend to reconsider its relationship with the union. At the Sixteenth National Congress of the ACFTU, held in October 2013, Prime Minister Li Keqiang expressed the hope that 'the trade unions at all levels continue to develop their role of bridge and link [*qiaoliang he niudai*] between the Party and government and the masses of the workers and employees, rallying these broad masses to the cause of the modernisation of the country.'⁴ Such expectations were confirmed almost verbatim five years later, in October 2018, when both Prime Minister Li Keqiang and Politburo member and Party chief-ideologist Wang Huning took the stage at the Seventeenth National Congress of the ACFTU to reiterate the CCP's view of the union.⁵

Nevertheless, these formulaic statements, common among both Party and union leaders, do not tell the whole story. In line with the ambivalence in Lenin's conceptualisation, they hide a history of contention about what the role of a union should be that spans the entire existence of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Through the voices of union and Party leaders of times past, in this essay I will show how, beyond the apparently smooth surface of orthodoxy, the relationship between the CCP and ACFTU has often been marred by seething tensions, ready to explode at critical economic and political junctures.

1951

Founded in May 1925 as a coordinating body for the activities of leftist unions nationwide, by the early 1930s the ACFTU had fallen into irrelevance due to the deteriorating political situation in the wake of the falling out between the CCP and the Nationalist Party. The CCP decided to revive it in the summer of 1948, when victory in the Civil War was in sight.⁶ In those early years of consolidating political power, the Party saw the organisation of the Chinese labour movement into a rigid and exclusive hierarchical structure as being instrumental to mobilising and controlling the human resources needed to rebuild the national economy.⁷ At the same time, the Chinese leaders were wary of the political risks involved in allowing the existence of a strong, organised national union. The compromise—encapsulated in the 1950 Trade Union Law—entailed a national union built on the basis of the Leninist principle of 'democratic centralism' (*minzhu jizhongzhi*), a structure that required the minority to submit to the will of the majority and the lower levels to obey the higher levels. The ideological assumption was that the ACFTU, a 'mass organisation voluntarily formed by the working class' (*gongren jieji ziyuan jiehe de qunzhong zuzhi*), shared exactly the same interests as the Party, which was the vanguard (*xianfengdui*) of that same working class.⁸

According to Mark Frazier, in the first months after the foundation of the PRC:

thousands of private-sector employees left unemployed by the collapse of industrial activity during the Civil War returned to their factories to demand their jobs back. They wanted higher wages, improvements in benefits and working conditions, and guarantees of full-time employment. In the state-

owned factories, Communist military cadres who had been placed in certain critical factories to 'supervise' factory directors often seized power from them, with predictable upheavals in basic operations.⁹

This led to a situation in which 'workers struck at will and frightened capitalists closed their factories.'¹⁰ The necessity to restore production and regain control over the economy led the Party to strengthen the political role of the ACFTU, a move that caused widespread mistrust and even hostility among the workers, who came to perceive the union as a tool in the hands of management. In response, in August 1950 the authorities launched a campaign against 'bureaucratism' (*guanliao zhuyi*) within the ACFTU, encouraging it to be more open and responsive—and less formal and rigid—to the needs of workers.¹¹

It was against this uncertain background that, in August 1950, the *People's Daily* and *Workers' Daily* published a speech by a Party cadre named Deng Zihui on the work of the ACFTU in southern and central China.¹² According to Deng, the union had become detached from the masses. Going even further, he argued that, although in the public sector the union and the Party were both working for the wellbeing of the workers and the country, some differences between the functions of the union and those of the Party could not be avoided. For this reason, he reckoned that it was necessary to admit that, in certain circumstances, it was possible for the union to adopt a 'standpoint' (*lichang*) different from the Party.

This apparently mild assertion triggered a heated debate. Li Lisan, a prominent Party leader and labour organiser during the Republican era who was then concurrently serving as ACFTU Chairman and Minister of Labour, intervened in support of Deng's thesis. In a speech given in March 1951, he affirmed that, although under the new government, the administration and the working class converged, it was inevitable for 'some small contradictions' (*xie xiao de maodun*) between workers and management to survive. For instance, even in the state sector there could be differing views regarding wages.¹³ Still, Li was careful to express his disagreement with Deng Zihui regarding the existence of different standpoints between the union and the administration. Such a distinction was substantially wrong because 'under the "New Democracy," public and private interests overlap and therefore the standpoint of the union and the administration also overlap. Wherever there is a difference, it can just be said that it is a matter between "fundamental standpoint" [*jiben lichang*] and "concrete standpoint" [*juti lichang*].' In other words, while the Party still determines the fundamental standpoint, this may require modification to suit concrete situations.

In a draft official document written on behalf of the ACFTU in September 1951, Li further distinguished between two sets of potential contradictions that could affect the work of the union: the contradiction between 'general interests' (*zhengti liyi*) and 'individual interests' (*geren liyi*), and that between 'long-term interests' (*changyuan liyi*) and 'ordinary interests' (*richang liyi*).¹⁴ In his view, while 'in the state enterprises the workers are the owners and there are no class conflicts nor exploitation, therefore the effects of the development of production are always beneficial for both the individual and general interests of the working class, as well as for its long-term and ordinary interests,' it was impossible to deny that 'there remain some contradictions in the practical problems of workers' lives, on issues regarding labour conditions.' On this

basis, he argued that it was of the utmost importance that even state enterprises be equipped with a union strong enough to represent the workers and protect their interests.

In October 1951, Li Lisan repeated his views in a report directly addressed to Mao Zedong, urging him to take a position in the debate.¹⁵ No official reply was given. However, months later, on 20 December 1951, during an enlarged meeting of the Party group of the ACFTU, Li was subjected to ferocious criticism.¹⁶ In strict Party jargon, he was accused of having committed three fundamental mistakes: first, he had ‘completely misunderstood the nature of state enterprises,’ confusing the relations between workers and enterprise under the new socialist government with the previous situation under the rule of the Nationalist Party; second, he had ‘denied the role of the Party as a guide of the union, considering the latter as the highest representative of the working class;’ and third, he was guilty of ‘subjectivism’ (*zhuguanzhuyi*), ‘formalism’ (*xingshizhuyi*), ‘routinism’ (*shiwuzhuyi*), and ‘paternalism’ (*jiazhangzhi de zuofeng*). This attack not only put an end to Li’s political career but also crystallised the discursive boundaries for the role of the ACFTU in communist China for years to come.

1957

As the Party-state prepared to launch the First Five-year Plan in 1953, the priority of the ACFTU shifted even further towards boosting production. In the winter of 1955, the Chinese authorities decided to nationalise industry, a development that required a major restructuring of industrial relations. Although the nationalisation was presented by the official propaganda as a historical step forward towards the end of capitalist exploitation, many workers formerly employed in the private sector experienced a deterioration in labour conditions. In particular, while in the past workers had at least felt that they were morally entitled to fight their employers, with the entrance of the Party-state in the ownership of their enterprises, they lost even that discursive right. Paradoxically, the symbolic claim that the workers had become the ‘master of the state’ ended up weakening their practical power. The union cast off the pretence of representation and shifted ‘from a unionism of class struggle aimed in fact against the employers to a state unionism, dedicated to nothing else than production growth and the management of social services.’¹⁷

As if this was not enough, a reform of the wage system launched in 1956 took a heavy toll on the workers, causing a wave of strikes.¹⁸ Mounting labour unrest in those months led the Chinese authorities to reconsider the right to strike, which had been omitted from both the Common Program of 1949 and the Chinese Constitution of 1954. Mao Zedong was the first to bring up the issue during a meeting of the Central Committee in March 1956:

It is necessary to allow the workers to go on strike, allow the masses to protest. The demonstrations have their basis in the Constitution. If in the future the Constitution is to be amended, I suggest adding a freedom of strike, it is necessary to let the workers go on strike. This can benefit the resolution of the contradictions between the workers, the directors of the factories, and the masses.¹⁹

Mao reiterated his stance in February 1957, in his famous speech ‘On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People.’ In his opinion, the contradictions among workers and those between workers and the national bourgeoisie had to be considered ‘contradictions among the people’ (*renmin neibu maodun*) and therefore had to be solved through the method of ‘unity-criticism-unity’ (*tuanjie-piping-tuanjie*) (see also Rojas’s essay in the present volume). According to Mao, the episodes of labour unrest that had taken place the previous year had three different roots: the failure of the Party to satisfy the economic requests of the workers; a bureaucratic and formalistic approach by the leadership; and the inadequate political and ideological education of the workers.

After less than one month, the Central Committee of the CCP adopted a ‘Directive on How to Handle Strikes by Workers and Students.’²⁰ This document—which to this day constitutes the only public official statement by the CCP leadership on how to manage strikes—espoused Mao’s point of view, claiming that in the event that the masses had been deprived of their democratic rights and had no other choice than adopting extreme measures such as strikes or protests, these actions ‘were not only unavoidable, but also necessary,’ and therefore had to be allowed. Moreover, the Directive stated that these actions did not go against the Constitution—and there was therefore no reason to forbid them—but at the same time suggested that Party committees infiltrate the strikes in order to take the lead and prevent the masses from being ‘stranded on the wrong way by some bad elements.’

Where did this leave the ACFTU? The Directive mentioned the union only three times, twice in passing, and once just to emphasise that Party committees had to ‘lead the union and the youth league to actively reflect the opinions and the requests of the masses.’ Facing irrelevance, when the CCP launched the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the union leadership saw an opportunity to reaffirm the role of the ACFTU on the national stage. On 8 May 1957, the *Workers’ Daily* ran a long interview with Lai Ruoyu, the official who had replaced Li Lisan at the helm of the organisation.²¹ In this exchange, Lai tackled the thorny issue of the position of the union vis-à-vis the Party-state, arguing for a more complex view that contemplated the possibility of contradictions arising not only between union and company managers, but also between the union, workers, and authorities. His words are worth quoting in full:

From the point of view of the union, one of the main problems at the moment concerns democracy. Only when there will be democracy, it will be possible to prove that the union is an organisation of the masses

For what concerns the relations with the administration, in the past the issue of the identity [of interests] has been emphasised and not much attention has been paid to the differences, so in dealing with problems we always stood by the leaders, it was not possible to represent the interests of the masses. This simplistic view of the contradictions among the people has often led the union to adopt bad work methods, preventing it from carrying out its function of mediator between the leaders and the masses. This will have to change.

For what concerns the relations with the Party, in the past it has been settled that the union has to accept the leadership of the Party. This is correct, but not enough attention has been paid to the fact that, being an organisation of the masses, the union also has to carry out independent activities, though being subject to the guidance of the Party for what regards policies and thought. Only by carrying out its own independent activities will the union be able to fulfil its functions.²²

In the interview, Lai went so far as to assert that in the event of strikes or other worker protests, the ACFTU had a duty to stand by the masses, because otherwise it would have lost credibility and the workers would have had no other choice than to establish autonomous organisations.

The following day, the *Workers' Daily* published another critical piece, a report on a long investigation undertaken in the previous months by Li Xiuren, Deputy Director of the ACFTU General Office.²³ The trip had taken Li into a dozen cities along the railway lines Beijing–Hankou and Hankou–Guangzhou. In every city, Li had found clear hints of a ‘crisis of the union,’ with enraged workers blaming the ACFTU for being nothing more than a ‘tail of the administration’ (*xingzheng de weiba*), a ‘department for the management of the workers’ (*gongren guanlike*), or a ‘tongue of bureaucratism’ (*guanliaozhuyi de shetou*), and striving to establish their own autonomous organisations. Many union cadres complained about the difficulty of their position: even if they wanted to support the rightful requests of the masses, they could not do so because of the imperative of respecting Party discipline. They were particularly concerned about being accused by Party leaders of ‘syndicalism’ (*gongtuanzhuyi*), ‘tailism’ (*weibazhuyi*), and ‘independence from the Party’ (*dui dang nao duli*), risking their Party membership.

The publication of these two articles triggered a heated debate about the role and the functions of the union in China. In May and June 1957, the Chinese press published a great number of articles that dealt with the perceived impotence of the union. Confronted with such criticism, the Party once again stepped in. In September 1957, at an enlarged meeting of the ACFTU Party Group, Lai Ruoyu delivered a long speech in which he substantively gave up any demand of independence for the union.²⁴ From that moment on, the ACFTU stopped playing any meaningful role in industrial relations. At least 22 high-level cadres of the ACFTU were purged in the following months, while Lai Ruoyu himself died of illness in May 1958. Relegated to irrelevance, the organisation was completely dismantled at the outset of the Cultural Revolution.²⁵

1989

The ACFTU was reestablished in 1978 in concomitance with the launch of the reforms. Even then, the CCP lost no time in making it clear that they maintained a purely instrumental view of the union. In his opening speech at the Ninth National Congress of the ACFTU in October 1978, Deng Xiaoping declared that the role of the union was ‘to protect the wellbeing of the workers, [which] can only increase gradually following the increase in production, especially in labour productivity.’²⁶ To achieve this task, the union was supposed to take a leading role in the ‘democratic management of the enterprise’ (*qiye minzhu guanli*), which in Deng’s words was the only way for the

ACFTU not to become ‘that kind of organisation whose existence does not make any difference’ (*na zhong keyou kewu de zuzhi*). In practice, this led to the establishment of workers’ congresses in hundreds of thousands of state companies. This development was due not only to the need to reinforce the legitimacy of the Party among the workers, but also to the necessity of gaining credibility on the international front in the wake of the PRC’s entrance into the International Labour Organisation in 1983.²⁷

It took ten more years for the CCP to begin to contemplate the possibility of a substantial reform of the union. In his opening speech at the Eleventh National Congress of the ACFTU, held in Beijing in October 1988, then CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang conceded that a real divergence existed among the general interests of the Party-state and the specific interests of the workers:

Under socialism, the working masses have not only interests in common with other sectors of the society—the general interests of the state—but also their own specific interests. In the past, the fact that the union had to protect the specific interests of the workers has been neglected and this has had a negative influence on the edification of the union organisation. We have to ... ensure that putting the construction of the economy at the centre, protecting the general interests of the people but also, at the same time, guaranteeing the specific interests of the working masses become fundamental guiding principles of the Chinese labour movement and of the union’s activities, making sure that the union carry out its social role in a better way.²⁸

The reformist bent of the Chinese leadership was confirmed by the release at the Congress of a Basic Plan for the Union Reform, a document that candidly admitted the weaknesses of the ACFTU—a lack of internal democracy, despotism of the cadres, scarce coordination between local and industrial unions, and alienation from the workers—and sought to trace a path for future reforms.²⁹ If implemented, these reforms would have laid the foundations for a truly democratic union, instituting a system in which lower unions would form associations of higher unions, along with a delegate system in which lower levels would send their delegates to higher levels.³⁰

These hopes for a top-down reform were dashed in 1989. Although the quality of life of Chinese workers by then had significantly increased, the morale of the workforce had sunk due to galloping inflation, a sense of uneasiness caused by the ongoing dismantling of the welfare system, and complaints about widespread managerial corruption.³¹ The death of beloved Party leader Hu Yaobang in April 1989 acted as a catalyst for the widespread discontent that was already brewing in Chinese society, triggering massive student demonstrations and an occupation of Tiananmen Square. Workers were also eager to join the protest, and between April and May 1989, independent unions sprang up in several cities in China, the most famous of them being the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation (*gongzilian*).

The ACFTU also decided to take action.³² On 14 May, a union delegation marched on Tiananmen Square to express its support for the students.³³ Two days later, 400 pupils of the Labour Movement Institute, a union think tank, marched to the union headquarters and presented the union leadership with a petition that asked the ACFTU to intervene as a ‘representative of workers and employees’ to call on the Party-state to

recognise the patriotic nature of the student movement, guarantee freedom of press and association, fight against corruption, adopt a new legislation on trade unions, and acknowledge the fact that the union had to speak and act on the behalf of the workers.³⁴ As more staff and students from the Labour Movement Institute participated in various demonstrations, on 18 May the ACFTU headquarter donated 100,000 yuan to the Red Cross to cover medical expenses for the students on hunger strike.³⁵ That very day, the ACFTU put forward three new requests to the authorities: that they start a real negotiation with the students; that they open an early session of the National People's Congress Standing Committee; and that they initiate a dialogue with the workers under the aegis of the union.³⁶

Some sources report that the ACFTU had decided to proclaim a general strike for 20 May, an unprecedented step that could be one of the reasons why the Chinese authorities opted to declare martial law.³⁷ After martial law was declared, the conservative side of the ACFTU took over and in the following months an internal purge stripped the union of most of its reformist cadres. That marked the end of any attempt at a structural reform of the ACFTU to this day.

Suspicious Emphasis

The moves of the ACFTU during these dramatic stages in contemporary Chinese history can be considered attempts at an 'institutional conversion' aimed at ensuring the survival of the organisation.³⁸ At the same time, they were not entirely inconsistent with the role of the union as a transmission belt. If anything, they were attempts by part of the union leadership to make the ACFTU live up to the Leninist ideal of a union able to act as a real intermediary between the Party-state and the workers.

Although much has changed in the landscape of industrial relations in China since 1989, the ACFTU has never relinquished its role as a transmission belt. Three main developments are worth noting. First, in 1992 the Chinese authorities passed a new Trade Union Law. Although this Law, amended in 2001, reaffirmed the control of the Party over the union and reiterated the ACFTU's monopoly over labour representation in China, it was nevertheless a timid attempt to pick up the broken threads of the reforms. For instance, for the first time since 1956 it reintroduced the possibility for the union to stipulate collective contracts on behalf of workers. Second, in the wake of the drastic restructuring of the state sector in the late 1990s, the membership of the ACFTU plunged from 104 million members in 1995 to the less than 87 million in 1999, a drop which pushed the Chinese leadership to pursue a new unionisation drive among previously neglected targets: private companies and migrant workers. Third, since the mid-1990s the core focus of union reform has shifted from the ideological realm to the more technical aspects of legal reforms. The promotion of the 'rule of law' in the field of labour relations has become an important feature of union activity, with the ACFTU involving itself in the drafting of new laws and regulations on labour and in providing legal aid to its constituency.

Nevertheless, none of these changes have been successful in boosting the reputation of the ACFTU among the Chinese workforce. Constrained by a Party that to this day sees it as transmission belt, the Chinese union is still struggling to gain recognition among the workers. In surveys that I carried out in China over the years, I consistently

found significant percentages of workers who had no idea whether they were union members or not, nor whether there was a union in their factory. In one survey that I conducted in 2016 in garment factories in Dongguan, as many as 28 percent of 250 interviewees had never heard the word 'trade union' (*gonghui*) before.³⁹ In light of this widespread irrelevance, the calls of the CCP leadership for the union to keep playing its role of 'bridge and link' could be deceptive. If history teaches us anything, it is that just under the smooth surface of orthodoxy, trouble might be lurking. The ambiguousness of the union's role—and the fact that Mao's speeches were supportive of strikes—means that the union, either officially or simply the idea of it, remains a place that is ripe for contestation and a potential Achilles' heel for the Party.

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