Work units (单位) and the ‘cradle-to-grave’ employment model that they represented have not escaped the general rejection of China’s Maoist past. Not only have they become symbols of inefficiency, but they have also been criticised for putting workers in a position of total dependence and therefore subjugation. In *Disenfranchised: The Rise and Fall of Industrial Citizenship in China* (Oxford University Press 2019), Joel Andreas attempts to set the record straight by tracing the changing political status of workers inside Chinese factories from 1949 to the present.

Ivan Franceschini: The work units of the Maoist era have often been described as inefficient and wasteful, and were blamed as being one of the main reasons of the backwardness of the Chinese economy before the reforms began. Do you think this is a fair representation?

Joel Andreas: First, we should reconsider the premise of these arguments—that the Chinese economy was backwards before the post-Mao reform era began. During the first three decades after 1949, China made remarkable advances in terms of industrial development. Between 1952 and 1965, industrial production grew by an average of 12.3 percent a year, and from 1965 through 1978 it grew by an average of 10.2 percent a year, keeping pace with Japan during this period, the years of the ‘Japanese miracle’. That is not as rapid as during the post-Reform decades (11.6 percent a year between 1978 and 1995, and an extraordinary 13.8 percent a year from 1995 to 2008), but it is remarkable nonetheless. China, of course, was still a relatively poor and undeveloped country in the mid-1970s, but it was far more developed than it had been in 1949, and its accomplishments were quite impressive in comparative terms. It developed a range of modern industries that had not existed within the country before 1949. It accomplished this through an accumulation regime that funnelled surplus into industrial investment, leaving relatively little for consumption. But it employed virtually the entire urban population (which meant it had by far the highest female labour force participation rate in the world), and it guaranteed everyone a living income.
China's work units were not organised to maximise profit, which meant that they were not particularly efficient, in terms of profit-generation as well as other measures. For instance, the fact that the state was determined to employ the entire population and that the vast majority of work unit employees had permanent status limited the flexibility of factories to hire and fire workers, which inhibited the maximisation of labour productivity. On the other hand, from a national perspective, little labour was wasted through unemployment.

For much of the Mao era, workers not only enjoyed lifetime job tenure, but wages and benefits were remarkably egalitarian, and work units faced constraints in using material labour incentives. These policies have been blamed for putting a damper on individuals' incentive to work hard. There is certainly something to these claims, but the impact of these policies was complex. Retired workers and cadres I interviewed almost universally insisted that people worked hard during the early decades of the socialist era, in large part because they identified with their work units due to the fact that they were permanent members. This, along with egalitarian distribution, created a social foundation conducive to the Communist Party's collectivist rhetoric.

This foundation was eroded during the reform era, as work unit members were gradually reduced to hired hands and the compensation of enterprise leaders began to greatly outstrip that of workers. Especially after the radical restructuring of industry—including the privatisation of most factories—began in the mid-1990s, incentives and punishments, including threats of termination, have been required to stimulate work discipline. With factories striving to minimise employment and maximise work intensity, labour productivity has increased, but factories are much less pleasant places to work.

IF: An idea that gained traction in the 1980s is that the agency of Chinese workers was largely constrained by their dependency on the work unit for the provision of welfare and public services. How does this idea hold up in front of the pervasive shopfloor activism of the Mao and early reform eras?

JA: Labour activism in China today is certainly quite different from labour activism in the past. When workers were permanent members of their work units, they were, indeed, dependent, as they could not easily change jobs and they depended on workplace welfare provision. Factory leaders, however, were also dependent on them. In the book, I show that work unit membership gave workers a kind of
workplace citizenship rights. They were considered legitimate stakeholders and could not be fired, which gave them a great deal of power on the shop floor throughout the work unit era, which extended from the 1950s through the 1990s. Moreover, during the Cultural Revolution, they confronted factory leaders in a highly organised, collective fashion. Rank-and-file workers organised their own ‘rebel’ groups, which hauled leaders up on stages to be criticised, and much of the criticism was about abuse of power and mistreatment of workers. The political and ideological constraints of those years, of course, were quite narrow, but within those constraints workers exercised a great deal of agency.

Today, the situation is fundamentally different. After permanent employment and workplace-provided welfare were eliminated, workers became less dependent on their employers, but having weak ties to one’s workplace is a double-edged sword. When labour markets are tight, workers’ mobility gives them a degree of market power, but their position is fundamentally weak because they can easily be fired and organising collectively is difficult.

IF: In the book you write that Chinese workers today are beginning to reorganise and their strikes and protests have won important victories, but also state that until they are able to regain some form of workplace citizenship rights, their gains will be limited and precarious. What would a possible way forward be in such a context?

JA: Factory workers in many countries today, including China, find it difficult to organise because employment is precarious and organising efforts are met with repression by the state and employers. The conditions faced by Chinese workers are particular in some ways. On the one hand, state capacity—including its capacity for repression—is relatively high and the authorities have been able to suppress efforts to create independent labour organisations. On the other hand, because labour markets for low-wage factory jobs have been tight and the state is reluctant to inflame popular opposition through excessive repression, there has been some room for strikes and for informal bargaining about employment conditions. As of now, however, repression is intensifying and Chinese workers remain in a very weak position. This will only change if they are able to mount a broad, powerful movement for workers’ rights.
IF: What lessons can we draw from the history of the socialist work unit in China in light of the neoliberal turn and pervasive precarity of recent years?

JA: The neoliberal turn across the globe and the collapse of socialist relations of production in the former socialist world has had a deep and lasting impact on the nature of employment. The current state of affairs, however, is also temporary. Workers will not put up with the degradation of their working conditions forever; they will once again demand greater rights to their jobs and more power to determine their conditions of work, as they have in the past. When new movements to fundamentally change the nature of employment arise, it will be critical to understand what happened in the twentieth century—when movements inspired by socialist ideas emerged as a powerful force—and to look especially carefully at the social experiments in countries where these movements took power. The purpose of my book is to help provide this understanding.