Abstract

Prevailing literature on Chinese labor non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which focuses largely on their relations with the authoritarian state and strategies for survival, mainly views that these labor groups, in order to survive, tend to confine their work to social service provisions and legal consultations that are permitted, or, at least, not prohibited, by the state. Hence, they hardly become the agencies of social change to build a labor movement in China. However, based on my observations between 2013-2015 in the Guangdong Province, I argue that a small group of labor NGOs have stepped beyond their supposed roles and become labor movement agencies in China; they actively assist and organize striking workers to negotiate with employers, and have hatched several informal labor groups in industrial zones. To explain this new development of labor NGOs in China, first, I argue that the state exerts its control on labor NGOs through a differentiated process, which creates a certain space for movement-oriented labor NGOs to survive. On the one hand, the state’s need for NGOs in relieving its social welfare obligations gives them a chance to “disguise” as an ostensible social service provider by employing strategies. On the other hand, the different functions, power bases and vested interests of labor NGO-related state organs—trade unions, public and national security agencies, and civil affairs bureaus—usually lead to less coordinated efforts in containing these groups. Second, the movement-oriented labor NGOs are able to develop strong ties to workers and facilitate labor organizing. During workers’ collective struggles, they organize training to enhance workers’ right consciousness and transmit the idea of collective bargaining to them; they also help elect and train worker representatives, offer tactics to
them, and are even present on bargaining tables on workers' behalf. By hatching informal labor groups, these labor groups network and educate workers in communities to build solidarity, and encourage them to run group activities and learn self-organization skills. Particularly, worker-turned NGO activists, who previously experienced labor disputes and with leadership skills, notably facilitate these activities due to their deep understanding of workers’ circumstance and demands, and profound knowledge of their language and labor dispute settlement. This research demonstrates that, although movement-oriented labor NGOs are probably transitional forms in China and not able to replace genuine trade unions, they have taken up some roles that trade unions were supposed to play, significantly contributing to improving the organizational capacity of Chinese workers.
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