

The Dynamics of Labor Activism in China's Auto Parts Sector: How Did It Succeed? Why Is It Declining?

Guowei Liang

gliang4@jh.edu

Phd Candidate, Johns Hopkins University, Department Sociology

Abstract

Since the early 2000s, China has witnessed a significant rise in labor unrest, most of which have taken the form of spontaneous strikes and protests. The total number peaked at 2,775 in 2015. However, this trend has been declining since then, falling to 1,385 in 2019 and further to 908 in 2023 (CLB Strike Map).

Conventionally, scholars attribute the success of labor activism in China to the rising working-class or rights consciousness of a new generation of migrant workers and their increasing ability to mobilize social resources. Similarly, they contribute the decline in labor activism to the country's repressive labor politics. However, a decade after the strike wave, the workers remain largely the same cohort of individuals. And the government crackdowns primarily target a small group of labor activists, while most of previous successful collective action are not organized by any formal organizations. This raises a critical question: why workers can successfully take on strike a decade ago but failed to do so now?

This study is build on the author's decade-long ethnographic study of labor unrests and collective bargaining practices in Southern China's auto parts sector. Drawing on Piven & Cloward's (1978, Piven 1991) theory of collective action, this paper argues that the initial

success of auto parts workers was due to a confluence of factors: rising worker aspirations, loosening vertical social integration, and the strong structural bargaining power of auto parts workers. In contrast, their later failures resulted from various factors that strengthened the vertical social control, delegitimized workers' collective action and eroded their ability to disrupt production. This study highlights that class consciousness and mobilizing resources are not pre-condition for collective action, but rather outcome of it.

Introduction

The strike wave of auto parts workers in 2010 shares similar characteristics with its counterparts in both developed and emerging market economies: it burst on the scene with a unexpected suddenness and strength (Silver 2003). On May 17, 2010, a spontaneous strike occurred in a Honda transmission plant, and lasted for more than 2 weeks, finally shutting down Honda's whole production in China. Although there is no official data of strikes in China, many evidences suggested that a strike wave sweep the auto parts sector in the PRD region. Following the strike at the Honda transmission plant, workers from approximately 50 auto parts plants in Guangzhou Economic Zone where a Guangzhou-Honda assembly plant locates and 100 plants in Huadu district where a Dongfeng-Honda assembly plant locates also went on strike¹.

These strikes delivered significant wins for workers. Wages increased, workers gained opportunities to participate in grassroots union elections, and there was a push for collective bargaining. However, the momentum from these early achievements began fading after 2015. Collective bargaining grew increasingly challenging, and the rapid wage growth experienced by migrant workers slowed considerably. Drawing on the author's in-depth ethnographic study of labor unrest and collective

¹ Interview, Chen 2015

bargaining practices in Southern China's auto parts sector, this paper investigates how the 2010 strike waves generated early success and explores the multiple factors contributing to their subsequent decline.

Piven & Cloward's (1978) theory of collective action provides a comprehensive framework for understanding why strikes occur at certain points in time and why they sometimes fail. Central to her argument is the idea that the power of protest lies in its ability to disrupt established systems. Disruption, such as halting production through strikes, pressures elites to respond because it threatens the functioning of systems they depend on, such as economic production or public order. Unlike traditional views that focus on formal organization or pre-existing networks, Piven emphasizes that disruption itself—not organizational strength or political alliances—is the key source of power in collective action.

Regarding the causes of protest, Piven (1991) critiques both malintegration (MI) and resource mobilization (RM) theories. MI theory traditionally framed protests as irrational, impulsive eruptions disconnected from organized social life. Piven rejects this view, arguing that collective action often arises from structural social conditions rather than chaos. However, she also critiques RM theory for overcorrecting MI's errors by normalizing protest as an extension of everyday politics and emphasizing its alignment with existing social norms and organization. RM analysis often treats protests as more organized and rule-conforming than they are, overlooking the defiant, disruptive, and non-normative aspects of collective action. Piven highlights how vertical social integration—strong hierarchical ties between elites and workers—often suppresses protest, while its weakening during periods of social change creates opportunities for mobilization. She also critiques RM theory's focus on the structural prerequisites for protest, arguing that even minimal lateral connections among workers can support mobilization.

Piven's rejection of horizontal connections as a precondition for collective action enables us to focus on the weakening of vertical social relations among workers. This paper will detail how the weakening social control of workers in auto parts industry in the PRD region create the fertile ground for the strike wave to take place.

However, Piven argues that the development of political organizations often undermines the disruptive power of protests. Once grievances are channeled through formal organizations, the potential for disruption diminishes, as these organizations tend to seek elite support to secure resources and legitimacy, making them less likely to escalate protests.

Method

The empirical information on strikes and the subsequent trade union reform in this paper is drawn from fieldwork conducted between 2010 and 2023. In the summer of 2010, right after the strike wave in PRD region's auto parts sector, the author conducted interviews of workers, trade unionists and managers in 2 auto parts plants. An additional survey was conducted in 2013 among 300 ordinary workers from 10 auto parts factories. More fieldwork in Pearl River Delta's auto parts was conducted in summer 2015, including 20 in-depth interviews with both union cadres and workers in the auto parts sector. During the years of 2020 and 2023, the author conducted further follow-up interviews and collected updated development on the Pearl River Delta's auto parts industry. As part of the overall research strategy, a combination of semi-structured and unstructured interviewing techniques was utilized. Meanwhile, some government statistic reports, and industrial newsletters were also collected.

I was able to closely observe workers' daily activities and develop personal connections with some workers by living in an auto-parts workers' neighborhood in Guangzhou Economic and Technological Development Zone in July 2015. Various strategies were adopted to recruit interviewees. These strategies include direct self-introduction to workers in their dorms and social spaces where people are at ease, like the rest area of shopping mall, as well as developing personnel connections by hanging out with people or participating in their free time activities.

Findings

1. Strike Waves in the Auto Parts Industry in the Pearl River Delta

1.1 Workers' aspiration for wage increase

Auto parts workers' strikes in 2010 gained legitimacy in part due to broader government policies at the time. After the global financial crisis in 2008, the Chinese government aimed to boost domestic consumption and promote industrial upgrading by raising workers' incomes. By 2010, both the Chinese central government and Guangdong provincial authorities were seeking to pursue a new model of economic accumulation in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region. To achieve this, the government introduced significant policies such as increasing the minimum wage, which provided workers with better grounds to legitimize their demands during strikes.

During the strike wave in 2010, this changing policy environment led the state to adopt a more tolerant attitude toward workers' collective action. By supporting higher wages and allowing more space for such activism, the government granted implicit legitimacy to workers' demands. This combination of minimum wage adjustments and state tolerance directly contributed to the perceived legitimacy of the auto parts workers' strikes.

1.2 Weakening social control

The strikes among auto parts workers succeeded due to several factors that weakened social control. Most of the workers in PRD's auto parts sectors were young vocational school students who had left their families behind and therefore lacked parental supervision or significant social obligations. This situation meant they "had nothing to lose" and had a lower threshold for participating in strikes.

Additionally, companies in the auto parts industry outsourced the management of workers' dormitories, leading to minimal oversight of workers' lives outside of working hours. Consequently, companies exercised almost no control over workers' personal lives, leaving their off-duty activities largely free from interference.

On the other hand, conditions inside the workplace were characterized by strict management practices and low wages, which created significant dissatisfaction among workers. Combined with their lack of familial or societal constraints, these factors lowered the barriers for workers to engage in collective actions like strikes.

1.3 Workers' strong bargaining power

Auto parts workers exploited the vulnerability of lean production and just-in-time inventory systems, which left employers highly dependent on smooth operations. For example, when workers at a Honda transmission plant initiated a strike, they managed to shut down Honda's entire production in China by disrupting its highly integrated supply chain. The exclusive relationships between assembly plants and parts suppliers within the modular production system heightened the impact of strikes. A disruption caused by parts workers in a single factory could lead to broader production halts across the entire network.

Furthermore, a tightening labor market in 2010 gave workers alternative employment options, strengthening their marketplace bargaining power. Many workers did not fear being fired as alternative employment opportunities were readily available in other factories. For example, some workers explicitly stated that they could easily find jobs elsewhere and even earn more than their current wages.

The recruitment of young workers from vocational schools reduced employers' labor costs, but it also created instability in the workforce, further empowering workers to collectively act without fear of losing employment.

2. Trade Union Reform and the declining workers' collective action after 2015

Following the 2010 strike wave, union reforms in China's auto parts sector initially strengthened union functions, aiming to mediate labor-capital conflicts and institutionalize collective bargaining. As part of these reforms, workers were allowed to elect representatives at the shop floor and factory levels, which created better grievance-handling pathways. In some instances, these reforms resulted in tangible

benefits to workers, such as wage increases. For example, a survey of 10 factories in the Guangzhou Economic Zone in 2013, revealed that the average wage increase claimed by workers in one year was 13.5%, higher than the official wage increase guideline of 10.5%.

However, this trend did not last. After 2015, union-led collective bargaining became increasingly difficult amid changing economic and political conditions. The reforms marginalized former strike activists, who were often blocked from union leadership. Managers frequently took measures to prevent these activists from entering union structures, limiting the scope for more radical demands during negotiations. Additionally, the democratization process within enterprise unions had a paradoxical effect. While the election of union representatives enhanced union leaders' legitimacy, it simultaneously undercut wildcat strikes, which were previously a powerful tool for workers' leverage.

As wages increased and workers aged, many who once had “nothing to lose” began to establish new social ties and obligations, such as purchasing homes, marrying, and starting families. These changes constrained their willingness to participate in collective action. For instance, younger workers who had participated in strikes during 2010 strike wave faced new personal responsibilities that dampened their earlier militancy.

The economic slowdown in China further exacerbated these difficulties. From 2014 onwards, the weakening economic environment, coupled with intensified pressure on profitability, led local governments to adopt more pro-capitalist stances, often repressing labor unrest. The rise of electric vehicles also contributed to the delegitimization of traditional auto parts workers' wage demands. As sales of traditional gas cars declined, auto parts manufacturers faced uncertain market prospects, which weakened workers' bargaining power and reduced their ability to demand higher wages.

This combination of factors—including marginalized strike activists, aging workers with new obligations, and the changing economic context—explains the decline in collective action and strikes in recent years. The initial gains in wages and union reforms have not been sustained, leaving workers with diminished avenues for improving their working conditions collectively.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to our understanding of the dynamics of labor activism in China. Firstly, it provided a critique of resource mobilization theory, which overemphasizes the importance of lateral connection. Instead, it highlights that the weakening of vertical control and the legitimation of protest demands play a more crucial role in the occurrence of strikes. First, it critiques resource mobilization theory for overemphasizing preexisting organizational structures and class consciousness as prerequisites for strikes and protests. Such an approach tends to lead to both overly optimistic interpretations when protests occur—viewing them as the outcome of worker organizational development or heightened class consciousness—and overly pessimistic conclusions during periods of protest decline, often declaring that “Labor movement are dead.”

Instead, this paper argues that class consciousness and worker organization are not preconditions for strikes but rather outcomes that evolve and grow through the process of workers’ resistance. The formation of the working class is thus historically embedded and ongoing. It asserts that working-class formation is never truly “dead” and that protests and strikes will resurface unexpectedly wherever conditions are conducive. By emphasizing the weakening of vertical control and the legitimation of protest demands as key drivers for strike occurrence, this analysis moves beyond rigid structural and organizational determinism in labor literature, offering a more dynamic understanding of worker struggles.

This paper call the early success of wild-cat strikes around early 2010s as the de Tocqueville stage of labor unrest, meaning the state’s gradual pro-labor reform provide legitimacy and inspirations for worker activism and loosening social control further facilitate the worker activism. While large-scale, militant strikes may have declined in recent years, the paper posits that more frequent, smaller-scale, and defensive labor resistances may emerge in response to wage arrears as economic growth slows.

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