

DOCTORAL THESIS

The state and labour organisation in China: the dynamics of labour protest outcomes

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Abstract

Previous studies of Chinese labour resistance have largely focused on the institutions and actors involved in disputes, including worker activists, labour NGOs, and official trade unions. The focus has been on the emergence, evolutionary path, and strategies of labour protests. As a result, scant attention has been paid to the consequences of labour protests. Based on my fieldwork in Guangdong between 2013 and 2016, this study seeks to understand the outcomes of labour disputes, arguing that the organisational characteristics of labour protests and the use of disruptive action in strikes are two key factors shaping protest outcomes. To explain the dynamics of organisational factors in Chinese labour protests, three distinctive organisational patterns have been identified, relating to the actors involved in labour protests, which can be categorised as worker-led, union-led, and NGO-intervened. A worker-led protest involves a dispute initiated by workers' activists or leaders, and is generally a one-off action with weak core leadership. In an NGO-intervened protest, workers can build a more or less sustained leadership structure to organise collective actions and reach the stage of collective bargaining. A union-led protest is organised by a workplace trade union, which, while often confronting enormous institutional constraints, also creates opportunities for the success of the protest.

This research demonstrates that worker protests with different organisational structures tend to adopt different forms of disruptive action to achieve their goals; this, in turn, affects the various outcomes of labour protests. I argue that, when the protest structure is better organised, workers are less likely to resort to violent disruptive actions. In addition, their collective actions are more likely to lead to

collective bargaining. When protests are less well organised, workers who lack resources and coordination are more likely to use forcefully disruptive tactics to gain more leverage from the outside.

I further contend that, in an authoritarian country like China, how the state responds to labour protests also greatly determines their favourable or unfavourable outcome for workers. This study regards protest policing as evidence of the state's attitude to labour strikes. My findings show that local governments are more likely to apply temperate and moderate protest policing to labour collective actions that are well organised, refraining from violent disruptions. Likewise, as less well organised protests and unorganised riots often lead to massive disorder and even violence, they are likely to trigger a harsh crackdown by the police force, as well as legal punishment. Hence, this study suggests that the interactions and reciprocal adaptations between protesting workers and the policing tactics of local governments have coefficient influences on the outcome of collective labour actions.

This study further argues that, in addition to outcomes that can be measured in economic terms, labour protests also have an enduring impact on institutions. Although it is not easy for protesters to achieve all of their goals, collective actions have played a role in generating incremental institutional changes in the labour relations system. Attempts by local governments and trade unions to experiment with collective bargaining and develop mechanisms for collective dispute resolution can be viewed as a consequence of protracted labour disputes in Guangdong.

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