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China Labor Bulletin

# Strikes, suicides and labour activism in China

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The suicides at Foxconn and the strike at Honda's components factory in Foshan have focused almost unprecedented international media attention on the plight of China's workers. Commentators have asked why are workers taking such drastic action, are we seeing an upsurge in worker activism, and if so could that threaten social and political stability in China?

CLB executive director Han Dongfang addressed these questions in a video interview with the Financial Times, and made the point that strikes and protests are inevitable when wages are too low and workers lack formal channels through which they can express their demands. These strikes and protests however should not be seen as a threat to the government, he said, but simply a manifestation of China's workers' determination to stand up for their own interests.

CLB communications director Geoffrey Crothall argued further in the South China Morning Post that the events at Honda and Foxconn demonstrated the need for genuinely representative trade unions in China that could present workers' demands for higher pay during scheduled, peaceful and equal negotiations with management.

The attention of the popular media in particular has helped put pressure on major brands such as Apple, with even Steve Jobs expressing his guarded concern. And importantly it has also raised awareness among a much wider audience of the problems faced by workers in China.

With increases in the minimum wage across the country and significantly higher wage demands from workers, several commentators are suggesting that we are witnessing the beginning of the end of low-cost labour in China. There are certainly some encouraging signs; however, as the reported detention of more than 20 striking workers at a Henan cotton mill on 1 June shows, workers are clearly not having everything their own way.

Many workers are still fighting long battles just to get the work-related injury compensation they are legally entitled to. A worker at a battery factory in Jilin suffering from lead poisoning, and a jewellery worker crippled by silicosis have encountered almost insurmountable obstacles created by both their employers and the local authorities in their quests for redress.

And workers continue to face widespread and blatant discrimination while applying for jobs. A new investigative report by a Chinese civil society group reveals that nearly 60 percent of companies in Shenzhen still actively discriminate against prospective employees on the basis of age, gender, health, appearance or residency.

Finally, a new research report available on our redesigned Chinese language website provides a detailed analysis of the development of labour relations in China over the last two decades and examines why it has thus far proved impossible for the government to legislate a solution to the country's growing number of labour disputes.