

We The Workers: A limited documentary about labour rights groups in China

By Richard Phillips
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Directed by Huang Wenhai, produced by Zeng Jinyan

We The Workers is a three-hour documentary about non-government labour organisations (LNGOs) operating in southern China's industrial heartland in defiance of the repressive Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime and its industrial police force, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), the country's only legal union body.

Workers in China have no legal right to strike or organise outside the ACFTU, which is an arm of the CCP regime. The official role of this massive union bureaucracy is to “maintain social stability”—i.e., collaborate with employers, the government and the police to defend the existing order. The ACFTU is actively involved in strike-breaking as well as the victimisation and frame-up of workers seeking to defend their jobs, working conditions and basic rights.

Huang Wenhai, 46, who now resides in Hong Kong, has been making films in China since 2003. He shot *We The Workers* secretly over a six-year period, from 2009 to 2015, and at considerable personal risk to himself and others involved in the production.

Independent documentary film making in China is a hazardous business, particularly for anyone attempting to expose the brutal working conditions of Chinese workers. Filmmakers, LNGO organisers and workers that dare to challenge “labour relations” in China face violent attacks by company thugs and police, political frame-ups and long jail terms.

The CCP, which broke with socialist internationalism and aligned with the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, has overseen the restoration of capitalism in China since the 1970s. It defends and speaks for the wealthiest echelons of society—the billionaires that reap massive profits from the brutal exploitation of the multi-million strong Chinese working class.

Beijing is terrified of any independent action by the Chinese working class, which has expanded massively over the past three decades. The regime will not tolerate any organisation or individual that attempts to organise workers independently of the state-controlled ACFTU.

We The Workers is banned in China. The film, however, was premiered at the Rotterdam International Film Festival in early 2017 and has been screened at festivals in France, the US, Canada and several other countries. It is currently being distributed by Icarus Films in the US.

Notwithstanding Huang's undoubted courage, *We The Workers* is a lengthy but limited work. The documentary uses “fly-on the wall” techniques with long takes, minimal editing and no linking narration, which seriously tests the viewer's patience. The rising wave of strikes that occurred in southern China between 2009 and 2015 by millions of Chinese workers is largely an abstraction for the first two hours of the film.

The principal problem of *We The Workers*, however, is not the director's stylistic approach but the film's uncritical attitude towards the political agenda of the LNGOs. They oppose the gross forms of exploitation of workers, but not capitalism as such, and openly encourage the illusion that the rights of workers can be met through the courts and legal system in China.

This outlook is at odds with the militancy of the few workers shown in the film who, through their own bitter experience, recognise the futility of appealing to the courts and the state apparatus. In one scene, an LNGO organiser is handing out pamphlets on labour law rights to factory workers. One worker angrily confronts him, declaring, “We're supposed to have a lot of things! What good is the law? Laws are useless in China.”

We The Workers offers little in the way of background information about the factories or industrial disputes referred to in the film. Nor are there any real details about the impact on the working class of the policies of capitalist restoration which have greatly widened the gulf between rich and poor.

We The Workers opens with visually arresting footage of a large shipbuilding facility and workers silhouetted against steel hulls and welding in noisy, cramped and dangerous spaces. These images are followed by drone shots of Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province, and

workers' residents in the industrial city. The film then turns to its principal focus—the life of LNGO activists in Panyu, a Guangzhou industrial district. No details are provided about the ACFTU and its history of strike-breaking and other anti-working class activities.

Zeng Feiyang, who founded the Panyu Migrant Workers Centre in 1998, is a key figure in *We The Workers*. He and others speak about the difficulties they confront attempting to organise workers independently of the ACFTU: the arrests, police raids on their homes, beatings by company thugs and the constant shifting of offices in an attempt to stay one jump ahead of state authorities. At one point in the film viewers are told that Peng Jiayong, another Panyu Migrant Workers Centre organiser, has been abducted, savagely beaten by thugs and hospitalised.

LNGO organisers are shown offering workers advice on legal rights, explaining how to win support from other workers and how to fight for better health and safety in workplaces. Meetings are held with small groups of migrant workers, a folk musician sings about courage and maintaining unity at one gathering.

In private moments some of the organisers—like their union counterparts around the world—blame workers for the situation they confront, complaining that workers “lack unity” and “do not know their rights.”

The labour activists featured in the film insist throughout that employers and the state authorities can be pressured to improve the lot of workers. A pro-bono lawyer demagogically tells a group of laid-off workers that their boss “will be scared [once] he knows someone like me is backing you up.”

Director Huang, who studied at the Beijing Film Academy and whose previous films include, *Floating Dust* (2003), *Dream Walking* (2008) and *We* (also in 2008), is said to have been inspired by, and maintains close contact with, Han Dongfang, founder of the *China Labour Bulletin*. Han was a leader of the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation which emerged during the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.

Han is now based in Hong Kong and has been feted in Washington by the AFL-CIO trade union apparatus. In 2010, Han told the *Financial Times* that he was doing his utmost to “depoliticise the labour movement in China” and argued that so-called independent unions in China were a cost-efficient means of politically containing working-class militancy.

Towards the end, the film organisers and a group of workers from the Lide Shoe Factory in Panyu celebrate successful strike action by over 2,500 workers in April 2015. The workers won a 120 million yuan settlement for payment of outstanding wages and overtime. The

documentary concludes as it began, with a series of lengthy shots of massive factories and drone footage of the city.

Just after filming of the documentary ended, however, Chinese authorities launched a massive crackdown on Guangzhou workers and LNGOs. Nearly all of the leading figures in Huang's documentary, including Zeng Feiyang and Zhu Xiaomei, were arrested, put on trial a year later, and found guilty of “disturbing social order.”

The court proceedings were screened on state television showing Zeng confessing to receiving funding and training from “overseas organisations hostile to China.” Zheng, Zhu and Tang Huanxing were given suspended sentences, possibly in return for what amounted to a public confession. The Chinese media provided no details on their year-long prison incarceration or the “legal process.”

The trial is part of a broader crackdown on foreign NGOs operating in China and those connected to them. In January 2017, new legislation came into effect requiring foreign NGOs to register. The CCP is undoubtedly concerned about the activities of NGOs both foreign, and those receiving foreign funding, given the increasingly aggressive stance of the US and its allies. Its determination to rein in the activities of labour NGOs, however, is primarily driven by its fear of the growing militancy of the Chinese working class.

According to some estimates strikes and protests by workers in defiance of the ACFTU are growing exponentially, climbing from 200 in 2011 to just under 2,700 in 2016. Falling growth rates, along with the impact US trade war measures on Chinese industry, will spark mass struggles across the country.

We The Workers provides glimpses of the vast Chinese working class, and is revealing of the attitudes of LNGO activities, but offers no way forward for Chinese workers. For that Chinese workers and youth need to return to the socialist internationalism that the CCP abandoned, and assimilate the crucial historical lessons of the struggles of the Fourth International against Stalinism in the twentieth century.

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