

Insurgency Trap

Labour Politics in Postsocialist China

by Eli Friedman

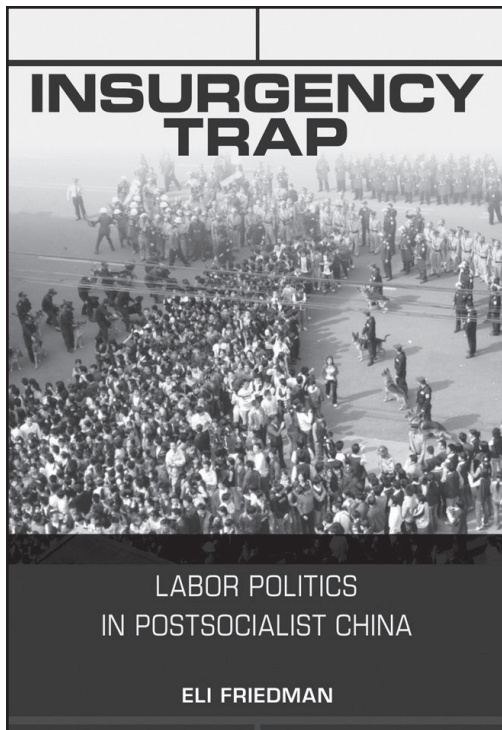
Reviewed by Glen Harper

“**O**ur wages are so low, let’s stop working,” said a worker at an auto factory in China as he shut down his machine and walked around the shop floor calling out to his fellow workers. This was the most exciting scene out of the book *Insurgency Trap: Labour Politics in Postsocialist China*, by Eli Friedman. Disregarding the established government controlled unions, a small group of workers organized among themselves to initiate a work stoppage and then hoped that the rest of their fellow workers would follow their example. At first a group of about fifty sat down outside the plant, and then gradually the other workers followed. For several weeks, they battled company management not only for better wages, but for a reorganization of their union, which had long ignored its members and actively undermined the strike. Their job action even sparked a wave of strikes across the auto sector in China, paralysing the major auto manufacturers, and to a lesser degree other industries.

Unfortunately, I found nothing else in Mr. Friedman’s interesting and well-researched book to excite me. The first level of union in Chinese labour politics is the union directly

inside the business, and these enterprise-level unions are generally useless to the workers. In many cases the chair of this union is either the company owner, the human resources manager, or somebody appointed by management. At one company, the union chair helped management bring in a new piece-rate production system that resulted in lower wages for the workers. Where the chairperson has come up from the shop floor, they have been fired if they advocated strongly for their fellow workers. As Mr. Friedman states, “Indeed, activist enterprise-level union chairs have emerged in a variety of different industries all over the country and have on many occasions successfully challenged capital in advancing the interests of membership. But time and again these union chairs are summarily fired and almost always in violation of the Trade Union Act.”

Stacked on top of the enterprise-level union are several more layers of labour bureaucracy. There are sectoral unions, which try to organize all of the workers within a given sector of the economy, unions based on township, district, and province, and then the various labour federations, all of which come under the national



**INSURGENCY TRAP:
LABOR POLITICS IN
POSTSOCIALIST CHINA**

Eli Friedman

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All Chinese Federation of Trade Unions. On paper, it appears that there is a large powerful force representing the needs of workers, but in practice they are just as useless to the workers as the enterprise unions. Union officers are appointed by the government, not elected by the workers, and most of them are chosen based on having a university background. Rarely do they come from the shop floor. They are little interested in, if not hostile to, the workers they are supposed to represent. As one high level officer stated: “When we establish unions we aren’t there to resist the boss; we are there to look after the interests of the enterprise.”

Essentially the Chinese worker is buried under a mountain of prejudice, exploitation, and repression. In the auto strike above, the township and district labour federations actually sent a goon squad to beat up the striking workers. Under these circumstances, the workers in any industrial facility are compelled to organize and fight on their own for their rights and a better life. Presently they are unable to reform the existing unions, or establish independent unions that will eventually be incorporated into the political process, similar to what we have in much

of the western world. They have even resorted to open violence against managers, unions and the police. Mr. Friedman doesn’t say it in these words. Rather, he uses such terms as insurgency trap, countermovement, appropriated representation, decommodification, double movement, and institutional moment. But the author did try to talk directly with workers, and report on worker resistance. So, even through the social science jargon, a fairly clear picture emerges of the desperate situation faced by Chinese workers.

Not only is this situation depressing from an empathy point of view, as an industrial worker myself, but also because it gives corporations around the world an escape when they don’t want to deal with workers who have acquired some rights, such as those in North America. “Made in China,” I keep seeing on products in the stores. Many of these products used to be manufactured over here, and should still be. But over in China, corporations can count on the workers being crushed. While the strike mentioned at the top did bring some wage gains for those workers, the union system remained un-reformed, and two of the strike leaders were fired. Moreover, most strikes have been fiercely

resisted by management, the unions, and the government, and have failed. Indeed, the government will use the police and military. Workers, as Mr. Friedman points out, played a major role in the ultimately defeated Tiananmen Square democracy movement in 1989, and suffered more repression than the students.

The only way to remove the option of North American corporations to off-shore production is to bring the rights and protections of Chinese workers up to the standards experienced by workers in North America. This is where Mr. Friedman's book can be quite useful. *Insurgency Trap* shows precisely where and what reforms are needed for China's labour and union system. Prime Minister Trudeau and the Foreign Minister can now call for specific changes as Canada pursues a

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free trade deal with China, instead of just saying that China needs to respect human rights. Chinese workers should be able to elect their own representatives at all levels, to have their representatives accountable to them and not management or the government. The Canadian government should even tie such tangible union reforms to mutual Canadian and Chinese investment. This Canadian foreign policy will not decisively impact China's labour politics, but it would strengthen the hand of their

workers. Just as important, over the long term it would help reverse the drain of Canadian manufacturing jobs overseas. •

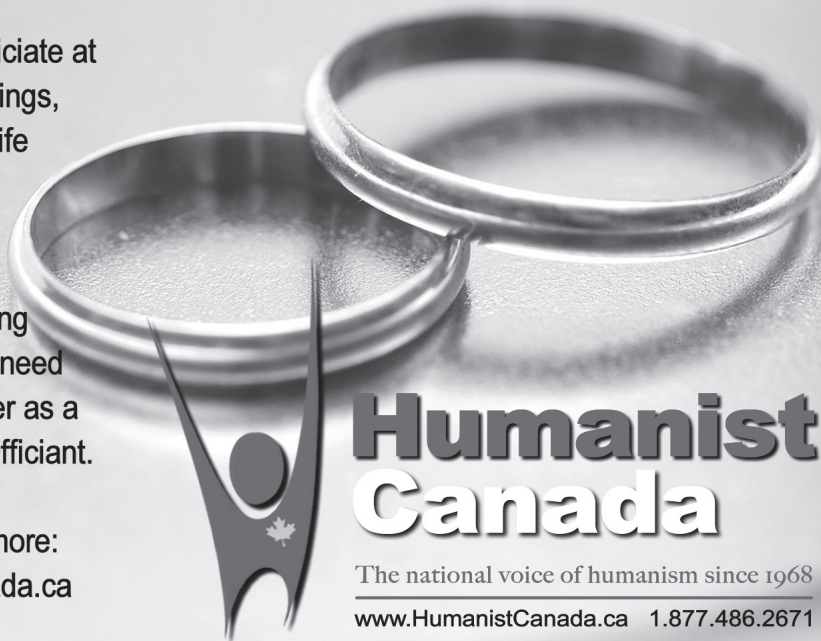
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