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The Spatial Politics of Labor in China: Life, Labor, and a New Generation of Migrant Workers

Introduction

The rise of China as the “workshop of the world” has attracted scholarly interest in the spatiality of global capitalism. The continuous geographical shift of the capital accumulation process from the West to Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and then to China and now the rapidly industrializing nations of South Asia have not only brought about economic miracles in the region but they have also rendered it vulnerable to crisis. As China has further integrated into the neoliberal world economy, structural economic imbalance and class inequality have become more pronounced. In our intervention here, we aim to draw out the deep contradictions among labor, capital, and the Chinese state in the context of global production.

Our focus is the making of the Chinese working class in a dormitory labor regime—the highly concentrated nature of the spatiality of work and residence that workers turn into a battlefield to fight for their rights. Our case study of Foxconn shows that the provision of employer-owned dormitories for workers is integral to capital accumulation in urban China. But worker resistance is also taking place in the dormitories and in workers’ communities. At their dwelling places, worker activists try to share organizing skills and disseminate protest strategies, as long as they can remain together. On the factory floor, they bring specific issues to management. In public spaces, they present collective demands to the local government.