The Radicalisation of the New Chinese Working Class: a case study of collective action in the gemstone industry

LEUNG PAK NANG & PUN NGAI

Abstract The repositioning of China as a 'world workshop' rests upon the nurturing of a new Chinese working class. This article focuses on questions of collective action of migrant workers who are now the major force of a new working class that actively strives to alter its fate through labour struggles. By studying the collective actions of migrant workers in the gemstone industry, we examine a process in which workers' resistance has developed from a single means to multiple means, from single-factory to cross-factory participation, from engaging only in legal action to launching varied collective action. Three primary questions are raised: first, what forms of collective labour action have arisen and what are their mechanisms of mobilisation? Second, how do shop-floor industrial relationships, legal systems and other institutional arrangements shape such collective resistance? Third, how do workers nurture class consciousness through their participation in collective action and, most importantly, how do they make sense of their struggle through a radicalisation process?

Following the introduction of reform policies by the late 1970s and the opening of China to global investment, Chinese peasant-workers have emerged as a major component of the new working class in China. In recent years China's expanding capacity for export-orientated production has been captured by the term 'workshop of the world'. The relocation of global capital to China is premised not only on cheap labour and low prices for land, but also upon the incorporation of diligent, skilled and well educated Chinese internal migrant workers who are willing to work in appalling conditions, who are suitable for just-in-time production, and who are potential consumers of global products. The repositioning of China as a 'world workshop' hence provides the bedrock for nurturing a new Chinese working class.