The dormitory labour regime in China as a site for control and resistance

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Abstract The paper uses research into industrial dormitories in Southern China to examine the role performed by employer-controlled accommodation in the management of human resources. The current rapid industrialization in China has been fuelled by the over 100 million internal migrants who move around the country on an annual basis and are housed in industrial dormitories within or close to production facilities. The paper argues that having labour supply 'on tap' facilitates management extending the working day, responding rapidly to fluctuations in product demand and functions as a form of coercive control, whereby employers have power not only over employment but also the housing needs of employees. The paper examines the history and contemporary use of employer-controlled accommodation, and argues that in both scale and systematic application, the current Chinese case is unique in the history of human resource management. Drawing on a case study of a large factory and dormitory, 'China Wonder Electronics' based in the Southern city of Shenzhen, the paper outlines the ways in which by working and living together, workers are able to develop collective resources that can be mobilized against managerial prerogatives, and challenge what is structurally a weak employment relationship for labour faced with the combined forces of big business and the state. The paper concludes by discussing the strengths and limitations for workers in what we are calling a dormitory labour regime.

Keywords Dormitories; labour process; China; labour regime.

Introduction

China continues to suck in foreign direct investment (FDI) from all parts of the world not only because Chinese labour is cheaper than elsewhere, but also because it is controlled through a system that squeezes more surplus value from each worker. Through FDI, a new generation of Chinese workers is being integrated into the global economy. Millions of these workers are internal migrants, who move between hometown and industrial zones, accommodated and socially embedded within a dormitory labour regime. This is more than a way of housing migrants. It is a highly paternalistic, coercive, and intensive production system, in which workers’ lives are dominated by employers, and working time is more closely under the control of employers than in systems where working life and home life are separated. However, the dormitory labour regime also nurtures resistance against transnational capital and the paper provides case study evidence to shed light on this resistance. The first part of the paper explains the