Women workers and precarious employment in Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, China

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In spite of the increase in transnational codes of conduct and legal mobilisation of labour, despotic labour regimes in China are still prevalent. Globalisation and 'race to the bottom' production strategies adopted by transnational corporations militate against the improvement of labour relations in China. The goal of this study is to provide a framework for understanding the working conditions of female migrant workers. While the inhumane working conditions of the women workers have been repeatedly observed, none of the existing studies has provided a solid analysis of the precarious employment system in China. This article aims to span global factors as well as local elements, demonstrating how they each contribute to precarious employment patterns. The hidden costs of the production and reproduction cycles are still unknown.¹

As China has become increasingly incorporated into the global economy over the past two decades, it has developed into a 'world workshop', providing a huge pool of cheap labour for global production. Since the mid-1990s we have witnessed a surge in the relocation of transnational corporations in China, especially from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, the USA, and Western Europe. More than 100 million peasant workers work in transnational corporations which are directly owned or joint-ventured by American and European companies, or they work for Chinese companies which act as contractors and subcontractors for these companies. There are concerns emerging among NGOs as well as in academic circles about globalisation and labour conditions in post-socialist China.

The 'Chinese Working Women Network' (CWWN) started its project in the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Shenzhen, just across the border from Hong Kong. Since 1996 we have witnessed the rapid incorporation of migrant labourers in this SEZ, which was set up in 1980. Before this, Shenzhen was only a small city with 310,000 residents and fewer than 30,000 workers. At the end of the year 2000, the total population had increased to 4.33 million, and its labour force to 3.09 million. Around 30 per cent of the population are categorised as permanent residents who have come from major cities as state officials, entrepreneurs, technicians, and skilled workers. About 70 per cent are classed as temporary residents, a status which means that they do not have the official household registration entitling them to citizenship in Shenzhen. In 2000, the total number of temporary residents was 3.08 million, which constitutes almost the entire labour force in Shenzhen, the majority being migrant labourers from rural areas.

The rapid economic development of Shenzhen and the advancement of its position in the global economy is dependent on the extraction of female labour from the rural areas. The process of 'globalising' Shenzhen has depended on cheap and