

Contradictions in Chinese Trade Unionism

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This study examines the function of the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) in industrial disputation. The widening extension of industrial disputation in China since that country embarked in the 1970s on a transition from a command to a 'socialist market' economy poses a dilemma for the ACFTU. This peak trade union federation is under pressure to challenge the new economic relations and legitimise industrial action. The structure and functions of China's trade unions (*gong hui*, literally workers' councils) were determined in the 1950s, under the influence of the Soviet Union, to serve the command economy, primarily as a transmission belt from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to the workplace. As China has transitioned to a socialist market economy, its trade unions have become compromised by their subordination to the CCP. Ideologically, this subordination was not a contradiction as, according to its constitution, the CCP also represented the interests of workers. However, under the transition to a socialist market economy the ACFTU members are neither able to independently represent nor to protect workers, nor are they able to pursue workers' interests. The dilemma affects China's trade unions at the workplaces of different categories of enterprise. This paper reviews the changing status and roles of Chinese trade unions and examines their prospects under the transitional economy. It discusses unionization, the status and roles of trade unions, union autonomy, workers' organizations and their governance. Its content is based on the current literature, a survey conducted in Shanghai and a study of four privately-owned enterprises (POEs) conducted in 2004. Data, which are currently being analysed, were collected by a survey of over 500 employees in 20 Chinese enterprises in Shanghai. Although a consistency with past studies is anticipated from the findings, the extent and direction of change in Chinese industrial relations is expected to be revealed.