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Social Foundations of Political Participation by Workers

The Case of Worker Participation in a Democratic Trade Union Election at a Taiwan-Owned Enterprise

Abstract: Based on observation and interviews, the author finds a close relationship between the participation of workers in a trade union election at SD Factory in Fuzhou and their prior work experience. This article begins by describing the process of a democratic election in the trade union and the situation regarding worker participation, and then analyzes how workers express their interests in the course of the election. With regard to individuals, this consists of seeking increased income, job stability, opportunities for promotion, and chances to acquire new knowledge and social connections, while with regard to the group it consists of helping fellow employees out of difficulty and serving as a channel of communication between the

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company and employees. This article also analyzes the social foundations of workers' political participation, consisting not only of how they perceive their standing as human capital and their socioeconomic status, social connections, or individual economic position, but also their perception of workers and capital from outside the local area and the relationship between outside workers and local society, as well as how they view relations between multinationals and trade unions and between the factory and the trade union in the process of globalization. Perceptions of these relationships are formed while they work and are closely connected to their work experience.

Around 2002 in coastal provinces such as Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Fujian, in enterprises that were not publicly owned—foreign-owned, civilian-operated, or privately operated enterprises—union organizations appeared, formed by enterprise employees through democratic election, with union committees and leadership elected by direct vote. In October 2002, in preparation for holding a trade union election at SD Factory, the factory's clients¹ invited Dr. Anita Chan to observe and monitor this election, and I was fortunate enough to be able to go along as her research assistant. We later went to SD Factory again in July and October to carry out further research. SD Factory, specializing in shoe manufacturing, is financed by Taiwan investment and is located in Fujian province. Its orders come principally from a well-known multinational, for which it manufactures athletic shoes. SD Factory has over 10,000 employees and nineteen production lines, each line accounting for 350 workers. Top management is Taiwanese, while middle management consists of mainlanders. The lowest position that a Taiwanese cadre occupies in the factory is that of specialist (*zhuan yuan*), with the title of director (*zhuren*) or assistant manager (*fuli*). Workers come from all over the country, with workers from provinces outside Fujian accounting for 70 percent and those from Fujian province outside Fuzhou city accounting for 20 percent; those from Fuzhou city account for 10 percent. The largest number of workers from outside Fujian are from Jiangxi, and the second-largest number come from Sichuan (the source of these and other statistics in this article is the interviews).

Statement of the Problem

Going to SD Factory three times to pursue research on the 2002 election gave me some ideas. First, however, let us look at a very interesting individual case study.

Yuan (a pseudonym, as are all names of interviewees used in this article) was born in 1975, went to work in SD Factory in 1998 as a piecework laborer (*zuoye yuan*), has served on the trade union committee, has been a member of the labor mediation team, and is married.² When word came that there was to be a union election in the factory, Yuan was the first to submit her name. After giving her speech, she evaluated the union election this way:

What I have said here today—well, in normal times if you talk this way the managers will put pressure on you. Today it's been different, everyone is equal. A few days ago when we were discussing this, I was sure this wasn't for real—just where are you going to find such equality?—so this came a surprise. I joined in the group discussion, and they said it was going to be an open, democratic election, with everyone equal, but I said that it's not over yet; the further we get, the more of a charade it'll become. I believed that, of the 10,000 people who work here, probably 9,000 thought it'd be a fake election, because we had never been treated equally before, so if suddenly they gave us equal treatment, it would really be a surprise. (Interview 4)*

Given that she felt the election might be unfair or rigged, and she had no clear idea of what the trade union law was all about or whether the union could help workers like her, why was she the first one to put up her name in the union election? The general belief is that those who leave their home areas to find work are mobile, and this mobility affects their identification with the factory where they work and their participation in factory management. Why was this worker willing to run for office in a union election? What sorts of workers joined Yuan in putting up their names for election? What interests were they trying to pursue through this election? And what is the connection between their experience of working away from home and the interests

*The nineteen individual case studies used in this article are numbered sequentially.

they were pursuing? Based on these concerns, this article will attempt to answer three questions: first, who were the workers standing in the election? Next, what sorts of interests were they pursuing through their participation in the election? Finally, what social basis underlay these interests? To answer these questions, I shall analyze three things: first, the democratic election process and the circumstances under which the workers participated in it; second, the interests which the workers were trying to pursue through the election; and third, the social basis for pursuit of these interests.

Research Methodology

This article places participation in a trade union election within the theoretical framework of workers' political participation, stressing that participation in an election is a form of political action. Principal documentation for this study consists of material gathered through interviews with workers who ran in the union election at SD Factory in Fuzhou, combined with other relevant material gathered through research. This study made use of material gathered at SD Factory during three rounds of field research.

The process of conducting these three rounds of research went as follows. The first round began with interviews conducted with the following subjects: leaders of the district union to which the SD union belonged; managers from the factory; and those who had operational responsibility for carrying out the election. Next, we attended a gathering of all union members, in which candidates running in the election gave campaign speeches, and after the meeting ended we randomly selected workers who had campaigned for election and conducted interviews with them to get their views. With the permission of the factory administration, we obtained a large amount of printed material issued by the factory concerning the election, and also profiles of the workers who had run for office. In addition, we obtained other sorts of material, such as the SD union bylaws, SD union election guidelines, and the employees' handbook. These materials supplemented our research data.

During this first round we enjoyed active cooperation from the

factory and its clients, who helped us a great deal in obtaining data on the election, but we still lacked interview data from the Fujian provincial trade union and the Fuzhou city trade union. At the beginning of 2003, our “enterprise governance and worker participation” project team, aware that we lacked material from official sources, hoped to be able to go through official channels to arrange a second round of research at SD Factory. One of the team members who had an official position contacted the Fujian provincial union, and after arrangements were made by the union and SD Factory, three professors and three students from our team carried out a week-long second round of interviews at the end of July 2003. This round of research began with interviews of people from the Fujian provincial union office, the Fuzhou city union office, and the district union office from the district to which SD Factory belongs, with the goal of learning about the operational situation in which the Fujian provincial union is promoting democratic union elections. After this, people from the provincial, city, and district union offices accompanied us into the plant to carry out research, and, in response to our request (we had expressed the desire to interview people at different levels), the factory put us in touch with workers of different ranks and specialties, managers, and union committee members. Interviews with these people allowed us to learn what their views of the election were and how the union was operating after the union election.

In September 2003, after reviewing the material we had already gathered, we wanted to carry out a third round of field research to fill in the gaps in our material and to get more detailed data on the workers, so I got in contact with SD Factory workers I knew from previous visits. After they had arranged interviewees for me, I returned to SD Factory accompanied by a student, and carried out six days of interviews in a location near SD Factory in October 2003. During this round of interviews we did not enter the factory, nor did we contact the factory administration or the local government. We merely interviewed nine workers to get their views on the election of October 2002 and the current operational status of the union.

During the three rounds of research, we interviewed a total of fifty-two workers; of this number, thirty-seven had run for office. Even

though our interviews touched upon how the union operated after it was established, the main thrust of this article is directed toward exploring what interests the workers were pursuing when they ran for office and their reasons for doing so, so my focus here will be on the election itself. No description or analysis regarding the operation of the union after it was established will be given here.

The Union Election and Worker Participation

The Process of a Democratic Union Election

The plan for a democratic union election was worked out initially between the client and the factory and then revised after discussion between the city union office, the factory, and the client. This discussion formed the basis for the finalized plan according to which the workers would be mobilized to participate in the election. The procedure for the election began with dividing the plant into seven electoral districts, after which there were discussion meetings, submission of candidates' names, open forums, and finally the election of union representatives (*huiyuan daibiao*) and union committee members (*gonghui weiyuan*) by secret ballot and open vote counting.

Before names were submitted, the factory held a meeting to discuss issues concerning the election of a new team of union officials. The meeting began with the reading aloud of "Union Election: Frequently Asked Questions," during which the nature and role of the union, union membership, and the selection of union committee members were explained to the workers. Next, employees' opinions were solicited, their concerns regarding the election were addressed, and answers to their questions and feedback on their views were posted on the bulletin board, so that a greater number of workers could understand what the democratic union election involved.

The election rules specified that any employee who had completed three full months of employment and was truly willing to be of service to fellow workers could stand in the election without any limitation regarding age, gender, level of education, or special skill. Workers in each electoral district who put up their names for election auto-

matically became union representative candidates. At first fewer than 100 names were submitted, so to encourage greater participation the factory administration told the workers that of those who ran and were elected, the union chairperson and deputy chairperson would be classified as full-time cadres (*zhuanzhi ganbu*) drawing a salary equal to or above that of a team manager (*zuzhang ganbu*), with a monthly supplementary allowance of RMB200 for chairpersons, RMB150 for deputy chairpersons, RMB100 for heads of union small groups (*gonghui xiaozu zhang*), and RMB70 for union committee members. This information was printed in a leaflet and distributed to the workers. After this, over seventy more people submitted their names.

The candidates running for union representative gave public speeches in which they described their reasons for participating and their goals, after which there were three rounds of voting to select union membership representatives (*gonghui huiyuan daibiao*), union committee members, and the chairperson and assistant chairperson.

Workers' Participation in the Election

The discussion meeting held by the factory administration made the workers aware of the nature and main purpose of the trade union and of the rules and regulations governing candidacy in the election. Its immediate effect was that a large number of people submitted their names for candidacy.

Distribution of participants in the election for union membership representative is shown in Table 1.

The 194 persons who ran as candidates in this election came from all areas of the factory and included production-line workers, staff, shop-floor chiefs, and team leaders (*zuzhang*). In their campaign speeches, all of them said that their main purpose in running was to help fellow employees gain benefits.

Interviews with Nineteen of the Candidates

What did those who ran for election have in common, over and above these concerns? To answer this question, I will compare the

Table 1

Distribution of Workers Running for Membership Representative

District	Total participants	Female	Male
1	26	25	1
2	37	35	2
3	20	17	3
4	46	30	16
5	22	12	10
6	26	17	9
7	17	8	9
TOTAL	194	144 (74% of total)	50 (26% of total)

Source: Factory election records.

case-study profiles of the nineteen interviewees to look for common characteristics. The nineteen cases summarized in Table 2 represent a random sample of workers who ran in the election and agreed to be interviewed.

While the nineteen interviewees represented here are only a small sample of the 194 persons who ran in the election, their situations are, to a certain extent, representative of the larger group. A close look at these nineteen profiles shows a number of common characteristics:

1. Voluntary participation: except for numbers 15 and 18, they all participated voluntarily.
2. Comparatively long work experience: except for number 18, the interviewees had been employed for four years or more.
3. Comparatively high levels of formal education: all nineteen had graduated at least from junior high school, while seven of them had graduated from senior high and two from vocational high.
4. During the interviews I discovered that, while they had run in the election, over half of them did not know just what

Table 2

Profiles of Nineteen Candidates

	Age	Sex	Married	Children	Education	Home province	Years from home	Years at SD	Rank	Volunteer or recommended	Won or lost
1	25	Female	Yes	1 dghtr	Jr. high	Anhui	8	5	Hourly	Vol	Won
2	20	Female	No	No	Jr. high	Jiangxi	6	5	Hourly	Vol	Lost
3	23	Male	No	No	Sr. high	Anhui	4	4	Hourly	Vol	Won
4	27	Female	Yes	1 son	Jr. high	Anhui	5+	5	Pcewk	Vol	Won
5	N/A	Female	Yes	1 dghtr	Jr. high	Sichauan	4	1	Pcewk	Vol	Lost
6	29	Female	Yes	1 child	Sr. high	Fujian	8	8	Hourly	Vol	Lost
7	N/A	Female	Yes	N/A	Jr. high	Fujian	7	7	Hourly	vol	Won
8	31	Male	Yes	N/A	Sr. high	Jiangxi	10	5	Pcewk	Vol	Won
9	N/A	Female	N/A	N/A	Jr. high	Sichauan	5	1	Pcewk	Vol	Lost
10	N/A	Female	N/A	N/A	Sr. high	Jiangxi	8	8	Hourly	Vol	Lost
11	29	Female	No	No		Fujian	11	11	Exchair-person	Vol	Lost
12	30	Male	Yes	N/A	Sr. high	Zhejiang	7	6	Crewchief	Vol	Won
13	N/A	Female	N/A	N/A	Sr. high	Jiangxi	6	6	Hourly	Vol	Lost
14	N/A	Female	N/A	N/A	Jr. high	Jiangsu	8	8	Crew chief	Vol	Won
15	N/A	Female	No	No	Sr. high	Hubei	4	1	Crew chief	Rec	Won

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Age	Sex	Married	Children	Education	Home province	Years from home	Years at SD	Rank	Volunteer or recommended	Won or lost
16	N/A	N/A	N/A	Sr. high	Fujian	5	5	Pcewk	Vol	Lost
17	N/A	N/A	N/A	Jr. high	Jiangxi	6	6	Pcewk	Vol	Lost
18	N/A	N/A	N/A	Voc. high	Jiangsu	3	3	Hourly	Rec	Lost
19	32	Yes	1 son	Jr. high	Jiangxi	8	6 mo.	Pcewk	Vol	Won

Notes: Ages and years of service are as of October 2002, and are rounded off to the nearest whole number. Those among the thirty-eight candidates actually elected as representatives are designated with “won,” while others are designated “lost.” Of the more than 10,000 employees at SD Plant, 80 percent are women, so women represent a relatively large proportion of those represented below.

sort of organization the union was, even though they had all mentioned protecting workers' interests in the campaign speeches they gave.

Running for Election and Expressing Self-Interest

What explanations did the workers give of their own interests while participating in the union election? What interests do they think will be served through this process? A review of the interview material shows a concern about two general categories of interests—individual interests and collective interests.

Individual Interests

Some candidates mentioned the opportunity to increase their own income and job security in the factory. Yan was in this category. When we interviewed her, she stressed that having the union was a win-win proposition. She consistently emphasized that she needed to be able to protect her own job before she could help others, because, otherwise, if her own situation was unstable she would be unable to help anyone else.

Well, for starters, the term of office in the union is three years, and so if I can be absolutely sure that nothing's going to go wrong for me in the next three years—because my family situation's a bit unusual, you see, and I really need this job—I don't want to make any mistakes, I just want to be sure that at least I can hold on to this job—to put it rather bluntly, I want to be sure I can make money, you see? . . . And at least I get an extra RMB70 a month. (Interview 1)

Once she became a member of the trade union committee, not only could she get an extra RMB70 a month in allowances, but during the three years she served in this office the factory could not fire her, which is to say that during the three-year term her job was guaranteed.

Among those who ran in this election were also some who mentioned that participation in the election could lead to a chance of promotion. In Interview 6, Mei said she believed that if she were

elected to the committee and then became chairperson, she could escape unpleasant work and attain a higher rank as well. “For example, they have a chairperson and a deputy chairperson, both of whom were originally just employees, but after they got elected their status changed. One of them is a department head (*kezhang*) and the other is a team leader (*zuzhang*)—their salaries went up and their status changed, too. They used to be worn out from working here” (Interview 6).

Becoming union chairperson opens up the chance for higher status and increased earnings, so it is very attractive for workers.

Some workers regarded participation in the election as a learning opportunity—they felt that they could learn a great deal working at the union—while there were also some who thought that the election would give them a chance to meet new people.

One such is Wang, from Interview 3, who, when asked why he had put his name in as candidate, said: “At the time I still didn’t have a very clear idea of what the union was, since I had just been introduced to the concept—I really didn’t know what sort of thing it was. But I thought that working with the union would teach me a lot of things, allow me to broaden my horizons.”

When she spoke about running for office, Q in Interview 5 made a particular point of saying that she herself did not have very much knowledge, and if she could join the union she could learn many things. Speaking about her reasons for participating in the election, she said:

My reasons for participating in the election? Well, at the time I felt I didn’t really know enough, and so if I participated in the elections I’d be able to acquire some new knowledge. What I’m saying is that we work and work and work. It will be nice to do something different, something better than the same old drudgery that you just keep doing . . . in the union you can learn something; you can get training and become better qualified. (Interview 5)

Some of the candidates viewed participation in the election as a chance to meet new people, an example being Hua, who said that, after running in the election and becoming a trade union committee member, “it seemed as though I’d have more contacts and be able to

get to know more people” (Interview 2). Yan also mentioned that one advantage of working in the union was that you could meet all kinds of people.

For some of the candidates, anticipated gains from running for office in the election were: first, one’s monthly income would increase by RMB70, and one would have job security for three years; next, one had a chance of being elected to a cadre position; and finally, one could learn new things and meet new people.

What, then, were the collective interests involved in running for election?

Collective Interests

The advantage most frequently mentioned by worker candidates in explaining their interests was helping workers resolve difficulties.

Tang from Interview 8 described her goal in running for office as follows: “I wanted to help everyone resolve work-related difficulties, and since most of us had come from other areas to work here, we needed an even better understanding of how to protect our legal rights. My motive for participating in the election was to protect employees’ legal rights.”

Chen from Interview 12 said in her campaign speech of her motives for running for office: “If I am chosen for the trade union committee in this election, I’ll make an all-out effort to work for the benefit of our fellow employees, do real things, . . . resolve their difficulties so that they can carry out their work smoothly in SD without having to worry any more.”

In Interview 4, Yuan described her reasons for running in the election as follows:

It’s an honor for me to stand here and share my thoughts. Those who are present and standing before you today have all come as representatives of all our employees. I’ve been at this company for five years, and during that time I’ve come across incidents that affected our interests. We felt helpless, wronged, and even angry, but we didn’t know how to protect ourselves. I join the union for one reason only—to use the union to look out for the interests of the workers—and I hope that everyone who’s here

thinks the way I do, that we're here to make life better for everybody, not just to advance our own personal interests.

She emphasized the feelings of helplessness and bitterness she experienced as a worker and her hope that the union would change the situation so workers would no longer feel helpless. At the same time she encouraged everyone to think as she did.

Of course Yuan was not the only worker who mentioned participating in the union election in order to help others. Almost all the candidates said they were running for office so they could help fellow employees. Some felt that since as workers they were at the bottom of the pecking order they understood each other's sufferings. This means to a certain extent they share a feeling that they come from the same class, though they themselves may not have been conscious of it.

In expressing their interests some candidates mentioned that they wanted to serve as a bridge for communication between the company and the employees to support the company's operation in accordance with the law.

On this point, the workers said:

My ideas as a candidate in this campaign consist of building a bridge of communication between employees and the company and making the union into a place that employees consider home. With this in mind, I sincerely hope that you all will lend me your support. Thank you! (Interview 13)

I joined the union because the union represents workers' interests and sees protection of workers' legitimate rights as its mission. While the union helps the company to do a good job on employee benefits, wages, industrial safety and health, and social insurance, it also supports the company's right to manage in accordance with the law so that our work will be better coordinated. (Interview 1)

This approach is probably intended to create a win-win situation for both employees and the company, since a cooperative relationship between the two will benefit both sides. If the company does well, the employees' interests will prosper accordingly.

The interests expressed during the election campaign were diverse and complex. They included both individual interests that are instrumental-rational (*gongju lixing*) in nature and collective

interests that are value-rational (*jiazhi lixing*) in nature. Especially noteworthy is the fact that the majority of those who campaigned put more emphasis on collective interests than the pursuit of individual interests, expressing the hope that after they joined the union they would be able to help workers resolve their difficulties and protect the interests of the workers as a group. Nonetheless, collective interests were intertwined with individual interests, since the pursuit of collective interests entailed some consideration of one's own individual interests.

Work Experience and Political Participation Viewed in Terms of Three Relationships

We discovered during the interviewing process that, whenever Yuan, Qin, Hua, Little Yan, or any of the other workers who ran for election described the interests they wanted to pursue through the election, they all mentioned such things as their own experience as workers, difficulties they encountered on the job, the survival needs of workers, their understanding of the life of workers—experience they had accumulated while leading the life of a worker. This being the case, we now need to clarify how their work experience has affected their political participation in the union election campaign.

I shall analyze the connection between their work experience and their explanation of the interests they planned to pursue during the election campaign in terms of three relationships: (a) the relationship between human capital (*renli ziben*), social network capital (*shehui wangluo ziben*), and individual socioeconomic status; (b) the relationship between capital, local society, and the workers; and (c) the relationship between customers/clients (*kehu*), the factory, and the union. On the surface it would seem that these relationships have no close connection to the interests workers express through participation in the union election, but upon closer examination it becomes clear that these three relationships and the interests expressed in the election campaign have a deeply rooted, fundamental connection.

Human Capital, Social Relationships, and Individual Socioeconomic Status

For a long time workers have found themselves on the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder: they work under stress on assembly lines for low wages, under poor conditions, for long hours, and without prospects for the future. This has limited their development in terms of human capital and social network capital. Consequently, their experience of relatively low socioeconomic status impels them to grasp for opportunities to develop the worth of their human capital and social network capital in order to raise their own socioeconomic status.

Human Capital and Individual Socioeconomic Status

Past research on status achievement shows that human capital typically plays a significant role among the many attributes determining individual income status. Individual human capital and income earned through employment have a positive correlation, while individual human capital and level of formal education are also related.

After several years as a worker, Qin had already become accustomed to the changes in lifestyle that working had brought. However, as she looked for work she found skills played a major role. She did not want just an ordinary job, but one that gave her a chance to accomplish something, yet she had none of the requisite knowledge.

Qin had worked in a toy factory in Guangzhou for two years when she heard that Fujian was a good place and workers there even had Sundays off. So she came, with others from her home area. Since she had no skills, after she arrived in Fuzhou she worked in a clothing factory as a trainee seamstress for several months. She passed the qualifying exam and went to work in SD Factory operating computer-controlled sewing machines (Interview 5).

These workers had liked the changes they experienced working away from home. They became aware that knowledge played an important role in getting a job and gaining status and realized that they lacked this sort of knowledge-capital. First, quite a few of

them did not have much education, and although some had graduated from senior high or vocational high school, a larger number were junior high graduates, a level of education that made it hard for them to find a job with status. Beyond that, the life of a worker was very intense, and there were few opportunities to obtain further education. Nonetheless, those who had been working away from home for many years felt a need to improve themselves. One worker described this by saying that just working all the time was not good, so they wanted to improve themselves—they wanted to get higher-status work in the office. During the interviews I heard a worker describe office workers enviously as smelling nice, while he himself smelled of sweat. He too wanted very much to smell nice. During the discussion meeting that preceded the election, the factory administrators agreed that elected committee members could go away for training. This gave the workers something to hope for, so when the time came for the election, they looked on it as one way to improve their knowledge.

Social Networks and Individual Socioeconomic Status

The social network is a structural concept which can be defined as a comparatively stable system consisting of the social relationships between individual entities (individual persons, organizations, and so on), with society as a whole being a macrosystem made up of interwoven or parallel networks.³

So what sort of social network exists among the workers of SD Factory? When Hua was asked whether there were many people from her home area, she said, “There are quite a few, but we don’t make friends just because we come from the same home town—you make friends with people you get along with. I’m living with relatives, but when I go to work I mix in with everyone. We don’t worry about which province people are from; even if someone comes from my home province I won’t necessarily choose her as a friend. You make friends with people you get along with” (Interview 2). Although there are many people from the same provinces working at the factory, there does not seem to be a very strong

sense of provincial identity. Social networks are derived mainly from work relationships. Interaction is not really based on common geographical origins: the former emphasis on place of origin has weakened among the workers, and “getting along well” now forms the basis for making friends.

These workers in SD Factory do not feel much regional identity. Yet the stress they experience on the production line gives them the feeling that they must “just concentrate on working hard and can’t do anything else—just work, work, work, and become more and more shallow” (Interview 2). In this situation they do not have enough contact with other people. But once they are elected to the union committee, their post requires them to devote three days a month to union work. They believe that doing union work will let them meet a lot of people, allowing them to expand their circle of acquaintance. Knowing more people provides more connections that can be put to use, and this can prove very helpful in advancing one’s career or seeking new employment.

Capital, Local Society, and the Workers

Here the analysis will focus on two relationships, the relationship between capital and migrant workers and that between migrant workers and the local society. Within this multisided pattern of relationships, the workers provide capital only with cheap labor; since their capacity to negotiate with capital is slight, their rights and social benefits are never realized. They remain outsiders in relation to the local society, and so, when a clash occurs between the workers and foreign-owned enterprises, it cannot give these outsiders the support and help they need. Their experience of city life and their experience working in the factory leave them wanting an organization to protect workers’ interests where they live and work.

Capital and the Workers

SD Factory in Fuzhou operates as a labor-intensive enterprise employing a lot of low-cost labor, which means that it always needs a

large numbers of workers. There is, however, a steady stream of laborers pouring in from outside the city and from other provinces, and since this factory is quite law-abiding, with workers being assured of getting their wages, many workers want to work there. In fact, one might say that for workers this was a sought-after factory. The high value placed upon an opportunity to work in SD means that workers are virtually powerless before capital and have no advantages at all when confronting it.

As a cheap source of labor, the migrant workers face not only low wages but also extended working hours. They work six days a week, eight hours a day, plus twelve hours of overtime, totaling sixty hours a week, and sometimes even up to seventy-two hours a week. Being unwilling to put in overtime is counted as missing work. Moreover, during the interviews we discovered that the enterprise had not really followed regulations in taking out social insurance for everyone. Only a small portion of their workforce has social insurance.

In Interview 19, Li particularly mentioned the wage and work-hour issues. He said:

We don't work a regular number of hours, and this problem of working extra hours is really serious. Those of us who are production-line workers don't even figure out how many hours of overtime we've worked—too hard to work out—so I brought up the issue of piece rates. Sometimes the amount of overtime really doesn't match our piece rates. We just don't know how it is calculated. I never have been able to understand what I get on my pay slip.

Consequently, during his campaign speech he mentioned that if he was elected he would help his fellow workers resolve such issues.

When Mei talked about why she wanted to speak for the workers, she said: "I myself am a worker, so I get tired and life is hard . . . I began as a rank-and-file employee, brushing on glue and attaching soles, and it was very tiring. I've been through it all; I understand what the workers are thinking, right? I've also done some managing, participated in management, so I understand what's on

employees' minds. Some employees are really tired; they spend every day with their backs soaked in sweat. Life is too hard" (Interview 6).

Chen also spoke from personal experience in giving reasons for participation in the campaign:

I have a feeling that there is some friction between workers and cadres, and so I decided to run for office. We've all come here from other areas, and working as an outsider isn't easy. This opportunity has come along at last, and you say to yourself that if you do get elected as a union committee member, you'll really put some effort into trying to accomplish something for the workers, because I myself came up from the ranks, and I'm still a basic-level cadre, so I can relate to the workers. (Interview 12)

They speak from their own experience and feel deeply for the workers' sufferings. Speaking up on behalf of the workers at the bottom motivated them to participate in this election.

From the wage and work-hour issues we know that the workers have no power to resist the powerful threat of capital. The chance for the union to hold democratic elections gave them hope of having a means of fighting for their own interests.

The Workers and Local Society

Wang Chunguang has shown the difficulties that the migrant population from rural villages encounters in the cities. Work is difficult to find. When they suffer harm or loss there is no channel for redress. "The boss gives them a hard time." "It's not safe." The administrative units of the government "treat them as outsiders" by favoring local residents when handling problems, generally harassing the migrant population and arbitrarily charging fees. When workers ask for help from the administrators responsible for handling the problem they have to pay a very high fee, and sometimes the administrators make use of routine provisions or ambiguous passages in documents from higher authority simply to make extra money for their departments at the expense of the migrant workers. Moreover, the administrative units "have a bad attitude."⁴ Did

the workers at SD Factory have to face these kinds of difficulties?

Yuan's experience as a worker includes being treated unfairly by local society. Not only did the local government give her no help, but the workers' own organization—the union—could not give her any real assistance, either. Yuan said,

I remember once when I was outside the factory the public security officer stood over us for the sanitation fee, which was originally five yuan, but we had to pay ten yuan, and then we only got a receipt for RMB5. We got caught like this not once but three times. We really felt we were being treated unfairly, so we went to see the union chairperson. We got to know her, and she gave us a satisfactory answer, that this would not happen again the next time. But the next time I walked through that area I was forced to pay that fee again. The only place we could think of to go for help was the union. (Interview 4)

Incidents like this make it impossible for these workers to feel at home, giving them a strong sense of discrimination in the places where they work. This feeling of discrimination and oppression is something that has gradually grown through many years' experience of working away from home, and the workers have wanted a way to alleviate it. The union election offers them hope.

The Client, the Factory, and the Union Election

Here I want to address the external factors that affected workers' participation in the election. Once the workers had established which interests they wanted to pursue, how could they use the union to attain these ends, and, in addition, why did the worker-candidates speak of functioning as a bridge of communication between the company and the employees during the election campaign? This, of course, must be understood in relation to their work experience at SD Factory.

The Client, the Union, and the Factory

On the relationship between the client and the union, Li (Interview 19) said, "As society kept progressing and China joined the

World Trade Organization (WTO), foreign investors and brand-name companies encountered more complex labor relations. They saw that now China was a WTO member, the labor laws and industrial relations were moving toward international practices. In order to realize their business objectives they promote a new approach to running our factories—setting up new things called ‘trade unions’ inside the enterprises.”

Since this union election was one of the transnational company’s human rights efforts, “the factory dares not refuse.” To understand why this was so, we need to talk about the client’s human rights programs at SD Factory in Fuzhou. SD Factory is a Taiwan-owned enterprise engaged in the manufacture of brand-name athletic shoes for its main client, a multinational company, which has set up a client representative office and a human rights suggestion box in the factory. One obvious effect of the client’s human rights programs is a heightened rights awareness among the workers, which is articulated as “human rights means higher wages, fewer hours of work, a safer working environment, respect for human dignity from shift and team leaders, and other such norms within the system.”⁵ If human rights are violated in the factory, workers can submit a written complaint to the multinational company, after which the multinational can impose fines or cancel orders as sanctions against the factory. Consequently, the factory maintains a very cooperative attitude toward the multinational’s human rights work. Because of this, the factory held a union election that met the multinational’s specifications. This gave the workers an opportunity to speak out.

This is why Yuan said, commenting on the election just after she had given her campaign speech, “What I have said here today—well, in normal times if you talk this way the managers would put pressure on you. Today it’s been different, with everyone being so equal” (Interview 4). Experience working at SD Factory has given workers an understanding of the relationship between the plant and the client, and enhanced their acceptance of the election.

The Factory and the Union

Life in the factory has given the workers an understanding that their relationship with the factory and the relationship of the factory with the client is such that, even though the client can monitor the factory, it is the factory that pays their salary. Because of this some workers believe that only by protecting both their own interests and those of the factory can they create a win-win situation.

“As for our union—even though we tried to convince our fellow employees, we still need to base what we say on what’s good for the factory, because without the factory, how could you have workers? You know, if the factory isn’t doing well and no orders are coming in, how are the workers going to make money when there’s no money to be made? What this all means is that in the end you have to stand on the side of the factory” (Interview 1).

Yan has worked in SD Factory for five years. She understands that, while the client plays a major role, her interests are most closely tied to those of the factory. Creating a win-win situation means that she cannot oppose the factory, but must take its interests and needs into consideration. Even though the client requires them to hold a trade union election, she knows that this is only a device used by the client for public relations, and her experience as a factory worker gives her a clear understanding of the relationship between the workers’ interests and the factory’s interests.

Detailed analysis of the three-way relationship described above reveals that, based on their own understanding of these relationships, workers made their own choices for action during the election campaign and expressed a number of interest-related needs as well. Their understanding of these relationships is, in turn, based upon their own work experience.

Conclusion

Our research has shown that worker participation in the union election was subject to a variety of forces, that the workers made full use

of this opportunity to express their own rights and interests, and that these interests reflected their experience of being oppressed, exploited, and discriminated against. This experience, under the right conditions, can become the driving force for active resistance to oppression. It has also become clear that worker participation in the election was not simply an individual undertaking, nor something based solely on regional origin or workers' group identification, but a concerted political action by an oppressed class.

The workers pursued these interests at different levels—the individual economic interests, group interests, and the interests of society as a whole—which shows that participation in the elections provided a means for the workers to express their thoughts, their aspirations, and their interests. Research also showed that the workers' pursuit of interests was based upon the perceptions and understanding of three social relationships that they had formed while working at the factory. These relationships are:

1. the relationship between human capital, social connection capital, and individual socioeconomic status;
2. the relationship between capital, local society, and the workers; and
3. the relationship between customers/clients, the factory, and the union.

It can be said that the workers' firsthand experience of oppression, discrimination, and exploitation not only formed the social basis for their participation in the election, but was also significant in that, under the right circumstances, it could constitute the driving force for action based on class.

Discussion

Class factors are very evident in political participation by workers. In *Shanghai on Strike: The Politics of Chinese Labor*,⁶ Elizabeth Perry mentions ancestry and geographical origins, gender, educational level, and class status as factors that affect political

participation by workers. She believes that, compared to these social relationships among workers, class status is not particularly important. In political activity, regional politics played a very big role, since resistance on the part of the workers varied according to their regional origins. Nonetheless, in describing the workers' expression of their interests and the social basis for these interests, I found that the degree to which geographical origins, gender, and class exerted an influence differed from Perry's findings. Consciousness of regional identity was gradually fading among the workers at SD Factory, since they did not take regional identity into account during the campaign, and the language they used during the election included no mention of working exclusively for the interests of people from one's home area. The goal being pursued, rather, was the protection of the common interests of all workers. So in this instance class factors played a larger role than regional identity.

Notes

1. Here the term "client" refers to people sent to the factory from the multinational, which has set up a client representative office at the factory.

2. *Zuoye yuan* is a production-line worker. In SD Factory a distinction is made between managers (*ganbu*) and staff (*zhiyuan*). The main difference between staff and production-line worker is that production-line workers are paid piece rates and staff are paid time rates. Managers are also paid time rates, but they get additional perquisites such as being able to eat in the managers' dining room and receiving special allowances.

3. Ruan Danqing, Zhou Lu, P.M. Blau, and A. G. Walder, "Tianjin cheng shi ju min shehui wang chu xi-jian yu Meiguo shehui wang bi jiao" (A preliminary analysis of the social network of the residents in Tianjin: Plus a comparison of the American social network), *Zhongguo shehui kexui* (Social sciences in China) 2 (1990): 157–76.

4. Wang Chunguang, "Xin sheng dai nongcun liudong renkou de shehui rentong yu chengxiang ronghe de guanxi" (Social identification of the new generation of mobile population from the villages and its relationship to the rural-urban convergence), *Shehuixue yanjiu* (Studies in sociology) 3 (2001): 63–76.

5. Chen Peihua (Anita Chan), "Kuaguo gongsi de shehui zeren yu qiyeji gonghui de minzhu xuanju: Gang Tai xiechang he fulu xiechang de gongan yanjiu" (Social responsibility in transnational companies and democratic elections in enterprise-level trade unions: Case studies of a Hong Kong-Taiwan-owned shoe factory and the Fulu shoe factory) (paper presented at the "Symposium on Trade Unions and Labor Movements Under the Market Economy in China," cospon-

sored by the Hong Kong Baptist College Department of Political Science and International Relations and the Chinese University of Hong Kong China Research Service Centre, October 2003).

6. Pei Yili (Elizabeth J. Perry), *Shanghai bagong—Zhongguo gongren zhengzhi yanjiu* (Shanghai on strike: The politics of Chinese labor), trans. Liu Ping (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2001).

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