

LABOUR COUNCIL DELEGATION TO CHINA

Thursday, January 6, 2011

In response to an invitation from the Guangzhou Federation of Trade Unions, the Labour Council sent a delegation of union activists to China for one week in early December. The delegation included John Cartwright and Winnie Ng of the Labour Council; Brad Honywill, CEP 87M President along with K.H. Wong, Vice-President and Howard Law, Representative; Lily Chang, Treasurer CUPE 79; and Gary Ing, Executive Member UNITE HERE Local 75.

The trip started in Hong Kong, where the group met with the leadership of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, and a number of labour NGO's which are involved in organizing around labour rights and employment standards in China. One of the most experienced leaders in this work is Han Dong Fang of the China Labour Bulletin, who had been at Tiananmen Square and subsequently jailed for two years. The Hong Kong Journalists Association also met with us.

In Guangzhou, we met with Chen Wei Guang the Chair of the GZFTU, along with a Vice-Chair and staff. The discussion lasted six hours and touched on a wide variety of issues related to organizing, recent strikes, transformation of the role of trade unions in China within a changing mixed economy, and collective bargaining. Local 87 had created Chinese language material on their collective agreements and training for bargaining which were provided to the GZFTU and the union leader at the Guangzhou Daily News who we met later in the trip.

We visited the main Honda assembly plant, and had an informative exchange with their leaders Jacky Shen and Huang Kang, focusing on their structure and the impact of the historic Honda strike in Foshan. Later we went to a Mitsubishi plant making air conditioner compressors for export, and met with the union president Peng Hua. The next day was with the Journalist union vice-president Liu Ly from the state-owned daily newspaper which was one of the first to operate a newsmedia website.

That afternoon was a presentation to a class of students and scholars at the International Labour Centre of Sun Yat-sen University on the Canadian labour movement and collective bargaining. We heard a report from students who had done an in-depth study on the Foshan Honda strike and its implications. We returned the next day to Hong Kong and joined a rally of migrant domestic workers demanding better treatment for migrants and adoption of ILO standards.

The last evening was spent hosting a dinner for some of the Hong Kong leadership. We drew a number of conclusions from this experience:

1. China is clearly the other economic super-power along with the U.S., and those two countries will decide the future of this planet. Therefore we should attempt to engage with labour in both countries about our common future.
2. Learning about the labour movements in both Guangzhou and Hong Kong provided an important comparator, while meeting with labour NGO's in Hong Kong provided rich contextual information about the current situation in China.
3. There is potential for positive change through recent worker organizing in China, including the possibility of progressive reforms in the labour movement. The GZFTU is on the cutting edge of labour movement transformation, and it would be useful to maintain regular communications with GZFTU on shared concerns over the impact of corporate globalization on workers in both cities, and share resources on collective bargaining and other relevant labour topics that will strengthen the participation of workers in the respective trade union movements. Labour Council should consider extending an invitation to GZFTU to bring a delegation to Toronto in the future.
4. There may be potential links for enterprise level solidarity in Hong Kong in sectors such as media and hospitality
5. The visit also helped to inform our Labour Council about both the need and potential for building stronger relationships with the Chinese Canadian community in the GTA.