

CUPE·SCFP

*National Executive Board Meeting
December 12 and 13, 2012*

CANADIAN LABOUR CONGRESS (CLC) MISSION TO CHINA

BACKGROUND

In mid 2012, the CLC participated in a high level mission of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) to visit the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). This was an initial effort to strengthen relations between the largest global union and Chinese workers.

The CLC sent its own high level delegation to China October 21-27, 2012 to meet with the ACFTU. The delegation included senior leaders from the CLC, CUPE, the Steelworkers, the CAW, and the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour.

Prior to the trip, the CLC delegation met with the Canadian government (Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the Department of Labour). We were also briefed by the CLC on the ITUC delegation trip to China.

IN CHINA

While in China, the CLC delegation met with:

- All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) secretariat member and International Department
- Canadian Ambassador to China and embassy staff
- Beijing Hyundai tour and meeting with union officials
- Chao Yang Hospital tour and meeting with union officials
- Beijing Municipal Trade Union Council; Workers Centre
- Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security
- Shanghai Municipal Trade Union Council
- Bao Steel tour and meeting with union officials

OBSERVATIONS

Collective bargaining in China is predominantly individual employment contracts. Collective agreements as we know them do not exist. There is no operational legal framework to represent workers by way of the grievance/arbitration route. There have been some legislative overtures towards collective bargaining and it is much talked about, but it does not exist as we in Canada know it.

The ACFTU is a creation of government and is the only authorized central trade union body. All affiliates must belong to and be sanctioned by the ACFTU. Worker's dues, payable to the ACFTU consist of 0.05% paid by workers and 2% paid by employers (a compulsory employer expense).

The ACFTU has traditionally played the role of a mediator between workers and employers in pursuit of workplace harmony (we heard this word often in China). Much has been written on the unique role of the ACFTU.

"It is reactive rather than proactive; it reacts within the bounds prescribed by the government, and only when the government instructs it to do so. The ACFTU is stuck in a rut, overly dependent on the Party and government, and cut off from the workers it is supposed to represent."
(China Labour Bulletin, March 2009)

The global recession and resultant austerity in Europe, the US, Canada, and elsewhere has slowed Chinese exports and GDP growth to 7.5%, their lowest rate in 15 years. The Chinese response has been to attempt to stimulate domestic consumer demands through the introduction of a basic social safety net which includes pensions, health insurance, and paid parental leave provisions.

The ACFTU acknowledges that widespread worker unrest exists and wildcat strikes have occurred, mostly involving non-unionized workers.

The ACFTU leaders we met were intensely interested in our views on collective bargaining and organizing; our description of Canadian norms in these areas were unfamiliar concepts to them. After meeting the ACFTU officials, the following words from the editor of the China Labour Bulletin strike home.

"The international trade union movement rests on three fundamental guiding principles: the freedom to form unions, the right to collective bargaining and the right to strike. Only when all three are recognized simultaneously, by the state and employers ... can each and every one of these rights be meaningful to the employees. In addition to this is the need to enjoy civil liberties, which are indispensable for the labour movement as well. In China, civil liberties are virtually absent."

The ACFTU have gained a seat at the International Labour Organization (ILO). Earlier this year, they worked with the ITUC and convinced their government to support their successful nomination of Guy Ryder as ILO General Secretary.

The ACFTU attends G-20 meetings alongside the central labour bodies of all G-20 countries. These are small but nonetheless important first steps towards alignment with the global family of unions.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The CLC will host an ACFTU delegation to Canada in mid-2013. Position papers on a worker's perspective on globalization will be shared between the CLC and the ACFTU prior to the 2013 visit.
2. Canadian labour's concern with Canada's recent signing of an investment agreement with China, with the proposed purchase of oil company NEXON by the Chinese government and with the abuse of Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) from China, will be shared with the ACFTU by the CLC.
3. The CLC will report on our trip to China to the ITUC.

PAUL MOIST
National President

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