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Labor NGOs in Guangdong Claim Repression



Reuters

Workers rest during a strike at Atsumitec Co. plant in Foshan, Guangdong province, in 2010. Guangdong province recently implemented a new policy to allow NGOs more sway in the province's major cities to help migrants, provide legal counseling, and teach workers about their rights.

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Guangdong Communist Party chief Wang Yang, a leading light among Chinese reformers, has given nongovernmental organizations great sway in the province's major cities to help migrants, provide legal counseling, and teach workers about their rights. On July 1, the province made it easier for NGOs to do business, taking the city of Guangzhou's policy of requiring a single registration — rather than more than a dozen regularly required elsewhere in the country— and applying it throughout the province.

But some labor NGOs say the new policy has come with a heavy price tag. They contend opponents in the government — they don't know who — are making life miserable for them.

The Dagonzhe Center, a migrant-rights advocacy group in Shenzhen, said that it has been subject to escalating harassment that has resulted in the organization being kicked out of its offices. In April, the center says the landlord told the group to move out of its space. Later that month, he cut the water and electricity.

"He implied that he was pressured to do so by the local government," said Chan Pinglan, an adviser to the center who works for the Hong Kong labor-rights group Worker Empowerment.

Dagonzhe remained open and continued its programs advising workers on their rights, including how to file

suits to get severance and overtime, and how to bargain collectively. The center has been in business since 2003 and figures it advises about 300 workers a month

But the fight deepened on May 1, Labor Day, when the center organized a gathering in Shenzhen over its treatment. Xie Shuying, an official at the center, said the police interrupted the 30 people participating. Later, about 100 police surrounded the center's office.

The center's staff continued to use the office until mid-June, when the lock was sealed and the staff couldn't get in. Security police watched the entrances. Now the center is moving to a new location, said Ms. Xie.

Qiu Guanglie, an official in the Shenzhen district where the Dagonzhe Center is located, said the center was simply having a problem with its landlords. "I've encouraged them to use the law to protect themselves," he said.

But the Center's landlord, who identified himself as Mr. Yang, suggested he wasn't acting solely on his own.

"I have too much pressure," he said. "Ask the government if you have any questions. I am already 60 years old and I have seven to eight family members to support."

Another Shenzhen worker's center, Chun Feng, is facing similar problems, including having its water and electricity shut off, said Zhang Zhiru, an official at the center. Mr. Zhang says that a dozen immigrant-rights centers have faced similar problems.

What's up? The burgeoning activities of the migrant centers have created a rivalry with Guangdong's official union, which is part of the provincial government, although it's unclear whether the unions are playing any role in this dispute.

"We want the trade union to be a facilitator with the government," said Ms. Chan, the Hong Kong adviser, adding that the union refused. "Our workers tell us the unions aren't helpful."

The union knows it needs to make changes to win greater allegiance from workers. Kong Xianghong, a senior official at the Guangdong chapter of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, said the union is trying to reform.

"We are trying to make sure unions are more professional," he said. "We are hiring people that aren't employed by the government."

He is also pushing to make sure that senior company officials can't become trade union chiefs in particular factories. No longer wanted for such jobs are senior officials in human resources and finance. Next, are direction elections — "one person, one vote," he said.

The current system of "indirect" elections — where "representatives" of the workers cast the vote for union leaders on a company-by-company basis — resulted in "people that management were comfortable with," said Mr. Kong. "In some private enterprises, the CEO wanted to control the unions."

Mr. Kong and other union leaders say that collective bargaining is the responsibility of the union, not other organizations. The union didn't comment on the controversy involving the NGOs. A union official, however, said that the union has created an organization to help labor NGOs and to generally "deal with labor relations issues."

That could put the union on a collision course with those NGOs that want to act independently and believe their mission also is to prepare workers for collective bargaining.

"We always emphasize autonomy and independence," said Ms. Chan, the labor NGO adviser. "The government is always watching us. Before they open up (to more NGOs in Guangdong) they want to censor NGOs who they don't think are obedient."

—Bob Davis, with contributions from Olivia Geng

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