

Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labour Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007. 340pp.

Workers in China are portrayed in studies of labour as either a threat to the living standards of workers elsewhere in the world or as victims of a new form of global exploitation. Ching Kwan Lee's detailed comparative study of forms of worker resistance in the declining North East, the Rustbelt, and the rising South, the Sunbelt, challenges both these views. She argues that workers are responding to China's 'decentralized legal authoritarianism' by developing a unique form of protest in which the centrality of law and legalism is salient. A crucial event in China's transition was the passing of the National Labor Law in 1994. This made legal rhetoric, she argues, the idiom of activism.

Lee demonstrates her argument in two parts. In the Rustbelt, retrenched and retired workers take to the streets protesting the failure of management to live up to the 'socialist social contract.' They protest the non-payment of pensions, withdrawal of heating subsidies, and loss of benefits arising out of bankruptcy. They feel betrayed and struggle to survive by doing casual work or setting up small informal businesses. They feel excluded and their protests are, she argues, protests of desperation.

Workers in the Sunbelt of Southern China are, on the other hand, upwardly mobile migrants working in the sweatshops of the new global economy. They are protesting the gap between what the law says and what is happening in the sweatshops. They mobilize legally over unpaid wages, disciplinary violence and injuries at work. Lee puts it succinctly: "[t]he Labor law and the legal contract have given migrant industrial workers crucial institutional leverage in their contests with employers about violations of labor rights" (p.191). Their protests are, she suggests, protests against discrimination.

Lee then follows the migrants back to their villages and shows how their access to land acts as a form of social insurance. These 'peasant-workers' are able to supplement their incomes by growing vegetables and keeping livestock. Their rural homes act as a form of social insurance, a place you go to get married, to retire to when you are too old to work or are retrenched, as

happened to an estimated 100 million migrants in the economic crisis of 2008/2009. It is where, she says, 'generational reproduction' takes place.

Lee has opened up a new and exciting perspective on China by revealing worker unrest mostly hidden from the world's attention. She shows how law has become a contested terrain in modern China. She concludes cryptically by suggesting that "we are witnessing the rise of a hidden alliance or an unorganised convergence of the peasantry, the working class, and the propertied middle class toward the terrain of law" (p.261). Clearly, such a scenario will require a radicalization of the peasantry (which she sees as a possibility in view of the land seizures) and the emergence of independent trade unions (which she thinks is unlikely because of the role of the Communist Party).

The book is based on 150 in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation over a seven year period, from 1997 to 2003. The interviews provide fascinating insights into the world of the marginalized in China. It is a view of the 'slow death of socialism' and the 'rebirth of capitalism' through the lived experiences of workers.

CK Lee is an engaged researcher actively working with labour NGOs. She tried to get a job in a factory so that she could engage in a workplace ethnography but failed. The result is a focus on the politics of protest, rather than the politics of production. This is a pity as she refers, in the beginning of the book, to Polanyi-type unrest over the commoditization of social life, and Marx-type unrest over exploitation in production. Unfortunately, she does not return to this interesting distinction in the conclusion and the reader is left guessing about the relationship between these two forms of unrest.

The descriptions of the migrants' relationships with village life are especially well done, although little is said about the impact of migrancy on household dynamics. She refers to the social reproduction of labour power in villages but the reader is not given any sense as to what this entails for those who stay behind.

This is a book that should read by labour academics and labour activists. It brings a scholarly perspective to what is arguably the most important challenge facing the labour

movement. Indeed, it could be argued that the future of labour throughout the world depends on the future of trade unions in China.

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