

IN GOOD FAITH: COMPROMISE IN THE FACE OF A REVOLUTION

One of China's leading reformists speaks about revolution, love, and labour—and the personal and public nature of compromise.

Han Dongfang in Conversation with Brian Dijkema

With his calm and soft-spoken demeanour it is easy to miss the fact that Han Dongfang was at the centre of one of China's most tumultuous events: the student protests at Tiananmen Square. We don't expect revolutionaries to speak softly, or to speak about compromise. And yet, despite appearances, Han Dongfang is one of the leading voices for peaceful reform in China, seeking the development of democratically-run trade unions, respect for and enforcement of China's labour laws, as well as the full participation of workers in the creation of Chinese civil society. Reforming economic and social life in one of the world's largest, most powerful, and, at times, brutal states is not a task for the faint of heart. *Comment* editor Brian Dijkema spent time discussing China, faith, and labour with the leader of the China Labour Bulletin on a stop of his North American tour discussing labour rights in China. This conversation provides a fascinating study of principle, conviction, and faithful compromise in places you wouldn't expect.

Brian Dijkema: What can we learn, in the world of labour and economics in North America today, from the Chinese and particularly your experience of the Chinese situation? What new things are coming from China that we should be paying attention to?

Han Dongfang: Let me start with the bigger picture first, in 1980. That's when the Chinese workers were released from the land, from the countryside, from the birth-place restrictions. It used to be that if you were

born in the countryside, if you were a farmer, you were not allowed to work in the city. This system is called the Hukou system. At that time it was slowly, slowly relaxed. This really attracted global investors to come to China and to look for opportunities.

At the beginning, investors were not sure about communists. But many people tried to bite the first tomato. They went to Xinjiang mostly from Hong Kong. They succeeded and the communist party gradually let go of their grip on production. Then, slowly,

slowly, more factories opened in the country, more special economic zones opened, and more labour flooded from the countryside into the city.

Now, some believe more than 70% of the world's stuff is produced in China. It's real global manufacturing, in a sense, and China provided the labour. The price of labour was low, of course. But at the beginning the price, although it was low, was a lot to those new workers from the countryside. It was quite nice to them because they went from nothing to something. In the '80s it was about 30-40 Canadian dollars per month. That's much nicer than nothing.

The result was that more and more investors and their manufacturers closed down on the other side of the world and came to China because it was cheap. That's the mathematic calculation. Labour costs were cheaper. But at the beginning, people didn't see what was behind the cheap price. Was it the communist system, poverty, or something else? I would say it was related to workers' rights because there were no rights, and therefore their price was low.

Why were there no rights and why was the price of labour low? There were two very important elements. First, individuals didn't have the right to bargain. It's the market. If you don't have the rights to bargain, you have to take it. Second, workers didn't have the right to organize. If you're an

individual and you work in the factory with 500 people with this big boss, how can you deal with that person? It's not balanced. Of course, this keeps labour prices low.

This is the picture of Chinese workers in 1980. Now, there's something different.

There are still no trade union rights and no rights to bargain in a workplace, but if what you earn every month is not enough, that's the reality. You cannot just swallow forever. You have a family to feed, you have a girlfriend or boyfriend to go out with and have dinner, all these things. You have demands, but at the same time, you don't make enough.

Therefore, people start taking action. Now wildcat strikes are a common way for workers to put out their demands. This has several impacts. One: it's not necessarily good for the employer because they may not be able to deliver on time. Two: the workers risk the consequence of being fired. At the same time, there are no other alternatives.

This is a new phase for Chinese workers. Instead of being passive victims, as workers or quitting to go find some other job, you hear, "Oh, I'm not quitting my job. I'm working here but I want more." They start realizing that they do have some power. They stop being victims; they emerge into fighting.

BD: I know that your own history is part of that change. Can you tell us a little bit about how you personally fit into this story?

HD: At that time, I was a railway worker. I happened to get into Tiananmen Square. There was a group of students talking about how we need democracy, we need freedom, the media, political reform. All these things were new to me. I am a very curious person, but I don't really read much, even today. I talk too much and do not read. I so admired those students.

They wrote about democracy, they wrote about freedom and how we don't have those things; that this isn't what we deserve to have. Wow. I started having conversations with them and lots of other people. There were lots of people, hundreds of people in the Square.

If you try to imagine yourself as a bird flying over the Square, you would see many groups discussing ideas, and then somewhere it's louder and they go and join together and start cheering "Yes, yes!" I just happened to talk to them and said, "I'm a worker. Democracy, to me, sorry, I don't read much, but democracy, to me, is whether we will have the opportunity to take part in the decision making of our salary, our bonus, our working environment, all these things. But from my experience, in my workplace, I don't. Now we taste

what is not democracy and I would like to taste democracy."

That's the point we were trying to make. Later on, some back and forth exaggeration. Then five weeks later, on the nineteenth of May, the government declared martial law. There was a huge reaction. On the one hand, people ran away. On the other hand, angrier people came running in. "How dare you declare martial law to deal with peaceful demonstration from the students?"

Then, at that moment, a group of people formed this workers' organization in order to defend the students, as a wall, as a defense. It was not really oriented in workers' rights at that time. We tried to make it as a workers' organization and union-oriented but also to get together to defend the students from the army.

We drafted the constitution and we went through a rough kind of a democratic election. There was a crowd of 90 to 120 people there and they said, "Whoever wants to run for the committee, stand up, speak up." I was one of them. Nine or ten people stood up and spoke about how they were going to serve this organization. I remember my speech. I first read my ID card number and my name and my work card. "This is where I work, this is my name." And I gave it to someone else. "You read it again in case I am cheating."

The reason I read that is because I believe everything we did was lawful, it was within our rights. I said that, in case it ends up nasty, I will go to prison by myself. I will walk in instead of having the police chase me. I said, "Therefore, vote for me." I got a lot

"If I don't go, I run away and politically, my life is terminated because I did not do what I promised. But if I go, and do what I promised, my physical life would be terminated." So one way or the other, my calculation was, "Alright . . . I may have a chance to

The revolution never benefits people. It only benefits the group of people that become the new regime, new emperor.

of votes. I was among five people appointed, and I served as the spokesperson; not as a leader, but as a spokesperson to talk to the media.

After the crackdown, government officials declared me as the leader and they put me on the wanted list as the first in a row. There were three from our workers' organization, and twenty-one from the students' organization on a separate list. That's why people gave me the label of the leader of that organization.

When I walked back to the police centre, I saw that I was on the wanted list as a leader. I didn't mind claiming that, because I promised in the election that I would walk in.

Believe me, it was a hard decision. I was planning to run away. It's not nice if you see this. Wow, this is it. This is the end. I thought, I remember, I came on my bike into a small woods outside of a riverbank and hid there. I said,

live if I go in. But if I run away, it's likely both my physical life and political life will be terminated." So it's not a good deal. Then I chose the one for which I would pay the lower price.

I rode my bike back to Beijing and I walked into the police headquarters. Not all the leaders who make public speeches or have public images are the same person when you see behind the scenes. We're all human beings at the end of the day. We have weaknesses and we have doubts and there are some situations we can't handle.

I remember even when I was in front of the headquarters of the Beijing police, I said to the soldiers, they were with machine guns, I said, "I am Han Dongfang and the public security bureau is looking for me. Here I am." The soldier looked at me, he said, "Go get registered" pointing to the registration across the way. I thought, "Wow, they don't know me. Even the soldiers

don't know me. These pictures on the wanted list don't work. I can just run away."

Even at that very moment, I still wanted to change my plan, to run away. It's not because I was brave. You are weak in front of this huge killing machine. But there was someone, just at that moment, who walked out from the building and looked straight in my eyes. He said "Are you Mr. Han Dongfang?" In that moment, I thought, "Okay, forget about running away. Just stay with the plan A." And I stayed. I said, "Oh, yes, I am here. I saw the wanted list, here I am."

He was shocked. You know when people are shocked, they don't know how to respond properly. He said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I am here. I'm on the wanted list. I'm the spokesperson and am still speaking on behalf of the workers' organization." He said, "Oh, right, you give up and admit that you did something wrong. That's great. You may save your life." I said, "Wait a minute, I'm not coming here to admit I did something wrong, but rather because I promised and also as the spokesperson of my organization. I am speaking to you as the spokesperson of my organization still."

I said, "If you want, we can make a symbolic move and maybe the soldiers will try to do something." He said, "Please don't create drama here. It's not the place to have drama, with the

machine guns. Let's have tea." He calmed me down and then half an hour after, they sent me to the detention centre.

That was my involvement, with the background. How I got involved was kind of a coincidence but was, I would say, deeply rooted in my communist belief. As someone stubborn, I still believe in that. In that value, although it's not necessarily labeled as communism, but the value was the same.

BD: You said early on that the leadership in the 1980s was corrupt but they would look like angels compared to today.

You've mentioned a number of times that there seem to be other impediments to the development of free and independent unions in China. To what extent is the impediment the government? To what extent is it other structural factors, like the breakdown of families and the undermining of certain codes that you obviously, in that story you've just told us, lived by? To what extent is the issue the breakdown of other social pieces of architecture that would otherwise knit society together? What about the inherent human weakness that you were talking about?

HD: One thing is the government, as you mentioned. The communist regime has lived together in peace with capitalism for thirty years. Whose power overcame the other? I would say that the capitalist power overcame the communist party power completely. The communist party has nothing left but a shell, a name, a military, and the structure.

Everything else within is, if you speak in an ideological way, capitalism; or if you speak in an economical way, is the market. The communist party is secondary. These two are compromised with each other, they coexist because they came a long way together; thirty years. One can't dump the other. They're a pair.

The communist party cares about political power, but they're realizing that there's something wrong: the growth of the economy is a foundation of their political power. But political power still is the most important to the party.

Conflict that occurs between labour and employers appears as political and social instability which hurts the legitimacy of the communist party.

Five years ago, seven years ago, there is no doubt that you would end up in prison as an organizer. Now, the government is trying to make effort to put the two parties together, to try to make a deal, to settle the strike, go back to work.

Slowly, really slowly, the government is getting away from the centre of labour disputes. They're no longer putting their arm in by suppressing the worker and saying "You cannot do that," in order to protect the employers. As soon as the government pulls out, they realize that labour and employers can deal with each other.

That's a new thing for the Chinese government. They see it, experience it, and they taste the flavor, it's nice. You just stop arresting these workers and leaders, and you are thanked by the workers. "Wow, good government." This is it. Do less, gain more. That's a very good deal. That's a new government attitude.

The workers born after the '80s-'90s generation also have different experiences than me, people like me, and their parents' generation. They worked in the '80s and '90s in the special zone. Some say they are spoiled people, the new generation. Whatever the reason, they are fearless. They are much more free-spirited. They are willing to go take actions, to fight for it. So the workers' attitude changed too with the new generation.

The union, the ACFTU, is currently in a situation comparable with the communist party of the late '70s. They want reform, free markets, and these things. But there's a danger—these might compromise your power. If you

don't, the economy will collapse and you lose your legitimacy anyway.

The trade union in China is facing the same situation, but the only difference is that it doesn't have the same power the communist party did in the late '70s. The trade union has no guns to enforce change. If they reform, their current power may be taken away by someone else. If they don't reform they will be further marginalized by the workers' own successful actions and they will die. They're in this really depressing and embarrassing situation.

You have to have freedom from hating each other. That's the biggest prison.

There are 900,000 full time staff members in the ACFTU. Can you imagine that size of organization? Not union members but full-time, paid staff. 900,000. That size of an organization has a lot of self-interest. You don't care about the communist party, you don't care about workers. You care about remaining an organization. That's good enough. Even the communist party cannot afford to knock down that organization.

So therefore, we say, "Okay, we are here as a labour movement. We're for peace. We're solution seekers. We're trouble-shooters. We're not troublemakers."

If you look at the official union, you don't want to look. You think there's no way to fix it. It's like saying you want to dilute the ocean into sweet water. It's not possible. Therefore, I would rather focus on the process itself than the result. That makes life much easier. If you focus on the result, especially if you want to see the result within a certain amount of time, you get so frustrated and you can't see the entrance points or how to get people to cooperate with you.

Forget about how long we'll get there or whether we finally will get there. Let's start with something available, which I describe as the already standing, fighting workers. That's the reality. You have a factory. You have many factories, you have these workers standing up organizing strikes.

So put the focus there and try to look for multiple winning solutions on that particular case. Focus on this electronics factory where 2000 workers are on strike demanding for legal payments with their social security. This is not an example, it's happening as I speak. Then the government, union, workers, employers, can sit together.

For the workers, is there anything else besides this? Get these representatives who are striking elected into unions instead of having people outside of

unions representing the workers to bargain. Enforce the labour law that is there.

After all, if there's a contract, it's a union contract, and you can claim the result. So at the end, everybody will win on this particular case. And you learn from this case and you move the experience to the next case, and the next case. When it becomes a normal practice, then you can go into the next step and we can discuss systematic change.

BD: *Anybody who's ever done collective bargaining knows that the heart of it really is the relationship of trust between the employer and the workers and that even if you have all of the legal protections in the world, it will not work, it will not be a functioning collective bargaining arrangement, nor will it be a peaceable workplace, without a relationship of trust between the workers and the employers.*

We've spoken before, off the record, about some of the difficulties with developing a culture and certain virtues that are required for these types of things. You've mentioned, a number of times, the corruption in China. China's had an official policy of state atheism for a long time. Yet, there's a resurgence of various religious communities in China, with which you're intimately familiar.

To what extent does the rebuilding of the trade union movement as a peaceful and productive movement, and of a peaceful and just China, an equal China, to what extent does it rely on a recovery of these basic virtues? To what extent do religious communities have a role to play in that?

HD: You put it exactly right. I understand Chinese history as a history of revolutions. We swallow, we swallow, until the moment we cannot swallow. Then we change everything, change regimes, by revolution. Lots of people died



and there was lots of bloodshed. The same old story repeats, until the communists succeeded. And repeat, the same tragedy. Therefore, I have thought about this.

What is the best way to create revolution? It's hate. All these revolutionary leaders try to manipulate people's emotions. They want one to hate the other in order to make sure you don't even mind to sacrifice your life for their goal; they make it your goal. But what goal?

We see that the revolution never benefits people. It only benefits the group of people that become the new regime, new emperor. The bottom line is that we have to get out of this. Even if there is a revolution that gets rid of the communist regime, we know there will be something else. It could be similar, and we don't want it. The communist party is not doing well and they did a lot of bad things, but we want to get out of this circle to start something new.

I believe the trade union movement can contribute greatly by the way of achieve rights to bargaining, as you mentioned, bargaining with faith, good faith. Don't cheat. That's something you build into the society. You create this trust in order to get a good revolution to happen.

We have to create, generate trust, even if there are different interests, even if

one used to cheat the other, even if one used to exploit the other. The best way to start this is for workers to say, "All right, we want to bargain with you."

From bargaining, you get compromise. Revolution is not compromise. It's one killing the other to replace the other. Trade unions are about compromise. We get better and better by bargaining. That spirit is very important to get rid of the revolutionary thinking.

I believe this from my own experience as a Christian. I came from a society and an environment of exaggerated hate. It made you hate your class enemy. This is what hit me the hardest. That's why being a Christian, love and care, controverts this. This is the most difficult thing to do, love your neighbour and enemy. How do I do it? I can't. But at least I can begin to get there, I don't hate them or I don't hate them that much. It cures you.

I can't say if the Christian belief could influence China's labour movement or not. I can't answer on other's behalf but the movement I am involved with and I believe in, this will be always there. We don't want to make the workers hate the employer, just like we don't want to see the employers continue cheating the workers. It's the same thing.

We are not trying to have one replace the other, to destroy the communists and destroy the capitalists. No, we want to live in peace and create new society that is based on a new belief; tolerance, compromise, and care. These values will gradually, hopefully rapidly, come into our old society and replace that desperate kind of reality of no hope and hatred.

You have to have freedom from hating each other. That's the biggest prison which makes you no freedom. You get free to what extent you're free. If at home, you hate your husband, you hate your wife, and you're free, you're not in prison, but you're not free. The

same is true for money; if you're addicted to money, you may be able to do many things, but you're not free.

It's the same with hate. No one deserves hate in this society, even those people that did lots of bad things. They may deserve something else after they die but not hate.

Hate offers a prison for yourself and hurts yourself first and you can't continue that. That's what I say, freedom from hating each other is the bottom line. If you can get over hate, I would say you can have freedom—free trade union movement, and free press, and free thinking. □



HAN DONGFANG has been an advocate for workers' rights in China for more than two decades. He first came to international prominence when, as a railway worker in Beijing, he helped set up China's first independent trade union, the Beijing Autonomous Workers' Federation (BAWF), during the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. He was expelled to Hong Kong in 1993 where he set up China Labour Bulletin the following year.

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