

## Work Life and Conditions: Chinese Migrant Workers Continue to Face Long Working Hours and Poor Working Conditions while Lacking Meaningful Representation

November 2019

China's internal rural migrant workers have been the cornerstone of China's economic growth since the commencement of reform. Harshly exploited, through low wages, poor working conditions and limited rights, while enabling China's rise to become the world's second largest economy, their plight has been widely documented. Since the mid-1990s, migrant workers' struggles have won improvements to their economic situation, often through wage increases. Meanwhile new legislation<sup>1</sup> has been introduced to protect workers' rights that might theoretically offer better protections, although many laws and regulations have been weakly implemented and significant gaps still remain.

Despite these gaps, some have held up employment and wage growth in China as an achievement of China's development path, while at the same time downplaying or neglecting the lack of labour rights, poor working conditions and rising inequality. One article published by official media in 2018, for instance, paints a very rosy picture of the achievements of the Chinese government work and says that

*"the quality of employment has also continued to improve, and labour productivity and wage levels have maintained synchronised rapid growth. In the past five years, urban and rural residents' income has grown by an average of 7.4% per year, outperforming the economic growth rate, and working conditions have continued to improve"<sup>2</sup>.*

Meanwhile, economist Dic Lo has focused on growth in real wages, including an annual real wage growth of 9.4% for China's migrant workers between 2007 and 2017, to question the ideas of those who talk of a need to change the status quo in China in order to improve the situation of Chinese workers and imply that such ideas are superfluous if not harmful<sup>3</sup>.

Yet our research, which includes a survey of 651 Chinese migrant workers<sup>4</sup>, shows that despite a growth in real wages, the problem of workers' welfare is not confined to

---

<sup>1</sup> The 2008 Labour Contract Law (amended in 2013) and the 2011 Social Insurance Law are notable examples.

<sup>2</sup> People's livelihood development is the foundation of a good life for people in the new era. Cheng Jie. CCTV. 9<sup>th</sup> March 2018.

<http://opinion.cctv.com/2018/03/09/ARTItPBgv53tsgVGAwWlIOhT180309.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> See: "Chinese wages" have far reaching significance. Dic Lo. Mingpao. 5<sup>th</sup> March 2019.

<https://news.mingpao.com/pns/%E8%A7%80%E9%BB%9E/article/20190305/s00012/1551724870591/%E7%9B%A7%E8%8D%BB-%E3%80%8C%E4%B8%AD%E5%9C%8B%E5%B7%A5%E8%B3%87%E3%80%8D-%E6%84%8F%E7%BE%A9%E6%B7%B1%E9%81%A0>

<sup>4</sup> The survey was conducted between June 2018 and January 2019 as part of research into the lives of first generation and long-term internal migrant workers in China. The migrant workers were living and working in 5 cities, including Dongguan and Huizhou in Guangdong province (27%), Fuzhou in Fujian province (25%), Yangzhou in Jiangsu province (25%) and Chongqing municipality (23%). The majority of the workers were factory workers, working in car and motorbike manufacturing, electronics, shoes, garments and glasses factories; while some worked in logistics, the service sector or as construction workers.

monetary wages alone. We must also seriously consider working conditions, including work hours, the working environment, exposure to occupational hazards and the right to form a union. Our findings show that there are still very real problems concerning working conditions, and in some aspects there are few signs of improvement. We found that while many of the migrant workers did indicate that wage levels had increased across their working lives, many still struggled to get by with the wages that they received. Moreover, many workers still regularly had to endure extremely long work hours, while continuing to face poor working conditions or a polluted working environment and lacking effective workplace representation. Therefore, independent from the debate about whether the existing system and its development path is a desirable choice for workers, we are sceptical of overly rosy pictures of workers' situation, such as that painted by Dic Lo and official media, which ignore the very real hardships still faced by many Chinese workers. Some key findings concerning workers' work, pay and conditions are outlined below.

### **Wages**

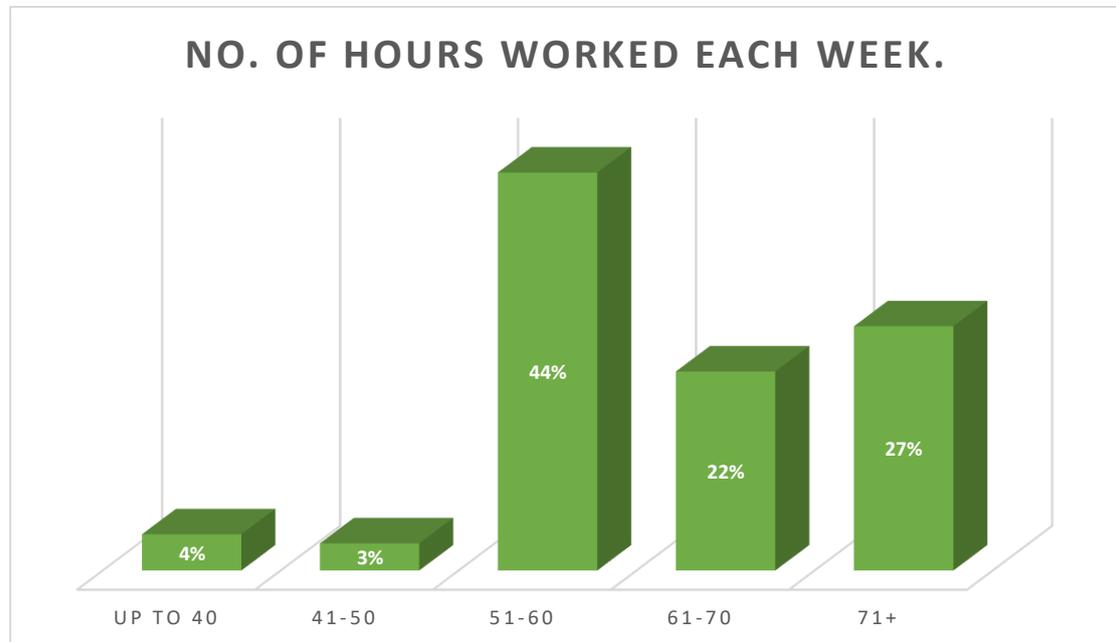
76% of workers reported earnings of less than 5000 Yuan per month, of which 37% earned 4000-4999 Yuan, 36% 3000-3999 Yuan and the remaining 3% earned below 3000 Yuan. 24% earned more than 5000 Yuan per month but, with the exception of five workers, less than 8000 Yuan. The lowest salary reported was by a gas station worker in Huizhou who earned 1500 Yuan per month. While the minimum wage in China differs across different provinces and cities, all of the workers surveyed reported earning equivalent to or greater than the minimum wage for a full-time job in the city that they were working in. Nevertheless, many of the workers appeared to find it difficult to distinguish basic salary and overtime and so it is difficult to really compare workers' basic salaries with minimum wage levels. Further complicating the picture, some workers' wages were also based partially on piece rates. One garment factory, who was clearer about her wage calculations told us that, "I have a guaranteed salary of 2000 yuan, which I receive even if it has not been achieved through the piece rate wages, but with the piece wages I usually earn 3000-4000 per month.

Regardless of relation to minimum wage levels, which have in any case been widely criticised for being far too low, what is evident is that there were many workers who struggled with the money they earned and were supplementing their basic wages by working very long overtime (see below). 17% of all the workers surveyed said that their salary was not enough to even support their basic needs, while amongst workers who said that over all they were dissatisfied with their work situation, a low salary was one of the most frequently cited reasons. On discussing difficulties due to low wages one worker reflected that, "My biggest difficulties right now are economic pressures. It is very difficult for one person to support a family.... I wish that my salary was higher so that I could earn more money and my children can have better lives."

### **Working Hours**

Long working hours were a significant issue for workers. Either to supplement low wages (it is common for migrant workers in China to want to work a lot of overtime so that they can boost their low wages) or due to workplace requirements, many of the workers reported working very long working hours when overtime was included. 93% of all the workers surveyed regularly worked more than 50 hours per week and 27% regularly worked more than 70 hours. The highest reported working hours were those of two of the workers who said that they usually worked as many as between 90 and

100 hours per week. Such long working hours and are often in gross violation of China's labour laws and were observable at private, foreign invested enterprises as well as Chinese state ventures.



According to Article 36 China's Labour Law, for example, workers should not work for more than 8 hours a day and no more than 44 hours per week on average. Some overtime work is permitted, however Article 41 of the same law clearly states limits on the conditions and on the number of hours that can be worked:

*The employer can prolong work hours due to needs of production or businesses after consultation with its trade union and labourers. The work hours to be prolonged, in general, shall be no longer than one hour a day, or no more than three hours a day if such prolonging is called for due to special reasons and under the condition that the physical health of labourers is guaranteed. The work time to be prolonged shall not exceed, however, 36 hours a month.*

The hours reported by many of the workers we surveyed therefore often greatly exceeded legal limits on overtime, with some exceeding the maximum monthly limit in one week alone. It is perhaps unsurprising that many of the workers said they were dissatisfied with their work situation mainly due to "too much overtime", "lack of rest", or feeling that "the work is too tiring".

## Working Far from Home

Amongst the migrant workers we surveyed were both long and short distance<sup>5</sup> migrant workers. We also spoke to a group of workers who had previously worked far from home but had returned after their land had been claimed for industrial development, the government had built resettlement housing for them and they were now able to work, albeit sometimes as dispatch workers, in the new industrial zone nearby. Being able to work closer to home was something that these workers frequently expressed satisfaction about. “At my age, it is good to have a job close to home” said one 50 year old worker. Another worker commented that he was satisfied with the situation since, “wherever you go to work it is all the same, although it is better to be closer to family so you can return home to see them.” At the same time, amongst those working far away in a different province, the distance from their home and family was something that some of them expressed regret about. One Dongguan factory worker who was originally from Sichuan said that, “the biggest difficulty is not having the children around.... I wish all the family could be together.”

## Health and Social Insurance

As outlined in our earlier reports, industrial pollution was a significant problem facing many of the migrant workers in both their working and living environments. Those who lived in factory dormitories and in the industrial areas suffered from increased exposure to pollutants in their living environment.<sup>6</sup> At work, the risks of adverse impacts on workers was sometimes exacerbated due to company disregard to protecting workers from health hazards. In many cases, workers were not properly informed of hazards or were not provided with adequate protective equipment. Some of the workers had contracted occupational diseases.

Migrant workers were also frequently found to be having their rights to social insurance infringed, with only 53.6% of the workers surveyed having the five types of social insurance as required by law. Subsequently, access to a pension has been a big worry for migrant workers approaching retirement age.<sup>7</sup> Another concern for some of the older workers was that, although the majority of workers surveyed (94%) had a labour contract, those who had already reached retirement age were sometimes offered much shorter contracts and thus had less security.

## Labour Union Representation

49% of the workers surveyed said that their workplace had a labour union and 51% of the workers were unaware of a union's existence.

---

<sup>5</sup> Rural migrant workers from the same province or region.

<sup>6</sup> See: ‘Chinese Migrant Workers Suffer the Effects of Pollution at Work and in their Living Environment’. Globalization Monitor 2019. Available from: <https://www.globalmon.org.hk/node/1493>

<sup>7</sup> See: ‘Migrant Workers Lack Security as they Approach Retirement due to Weak Social Insurance’. Globalization Monitor 2019. Available from: <https://www.globalmon.org.hk/node/1692>

While 20% of all workers said that their workplace did not have a union, 31% said that they did not know whether there was a union or not. Nevertheless, workers from the same workplace sometimes gave different or contradictory answers about the existence of a union; while some said that there was a workplace union, others from the same workplace answered that they either did not know whether there was a union or that there was no union. This might suggest a limited union effectiveness or lack of relevance to these workers in workplaces where they did exist.

When asked about their opinions on the importance of a workplace union, 40% of workers said that they thought a union was either very useful (4%) or useful (36%), while 24% said that they thought a union was useless (23%) or very useless (1%). It should also be noted, however, that 36% of the workers did not answer this question or said that they did not know. This is perhaps unsurprising considering the high percentage of workers who did not have or were unsure whether a union existed at their workplace, and potentially indicates a higher degree of ineffectiveness than the statistics might at first appear to suggest. Nevertheless, of those who said that there was a union at their workplace, the majority (72.8%) indicated that it was either useful or very useful, while 25% thought that it was useless or very useless.

In follow-up interviews, when asked about the function of the workplace union where one was known to exist, some workers said that they thought it had “some benefits”. However, when asked what it did, workers said that it organized “some small activities” or “excursions around the area”.

Some of the workers made more critical comments. One retail service worker commented that, “generally if someone has a problem they will not go to the union, it is a waste of time that doesn’t solve problems.” Meanwhile, according to workers at a shoe factory where poor ventilation and bad smells in the workshop had made some of them feel unwell, “We previously went to find the union because of the bad smell in the workshop, but the union would have nothing to do with it”. Furthermore, even where a union did exist it did not necessarily represent all the workers at the workplace. A dispatch worker in an automobile factory in Chongqing, for example, highlighted the problem of a lack of representation for dispatch workers. “There is a union but it doesn’t care about us. We are not union members because we are all dispatch workers and the trade union only cares about regular workers and so I don’t know whether it is any use or not.”

### **Changes Across Their Working Lives**

In discussing changes over the course of their working lives, many workers commented that they thought that wages had improved, although they were often less confident about working conditions. According to one shoe factory worker in Dongguan, “Generally speaking there is progress; wages are still ok, but working conditions are the same. It has always been like this...factories are moving ever further away.” Another worker commented that, “In general there has been some progress in work aspects, salaries are higher than before, but working conditions and other things have not changed much. I really don’t know. I work in the factory every day and rarely go out and so I don’t feel it”.

One migrant worker who had first begun working in 1993, said that, “at the beginning I was doing some of the dirtiest and hardest work but at the time I had the strength and

so was usually able to find work,” however because of physical exertion when he was younger his waist was now damaged and he could not use it anymore. As a result, he had already retired early and returned to the countryside.

One construction worker described how he first became a migrant worker in 1990. “At that time in order to become a migrant worker you needed to find guanxi. Relatives helped me to find a job in Yichang selling coal. Later the business was not so good and since then I have gone out to work all over.” Now he mainly works in the Jiangsu or Zhejiang area demolishing houses. He said that he was dissatisfied with this situation because “the hut [where the workers live] is very simple and I often have to move. When one job is finished I have to move on to another place.”

Another worker, who had first become a migrant worker in 1995 and had recently won a gold cup bonus for being one of the oldest workers at his factory, talked about his change in location and job across his lifetime, “At the beginning it was difficult for men to find a job. We went to Shaanxi to mine coal, but it was very dangerous and accidents often happened and so later I came to work in Guangdong.” At the time of the survey he worked in a glasses factory in Dongguan.

#### Summary

Our research has found that despite trends in rising wages over the last two decades, many of China’s migrant workers continue to face harsh working environments and to have their labour rights infringed. This includes overtime hours that exceed legal limits, hazardous and polluted working and living environments, as well as a lack of effective worker representation to help make improvements to their situation. Even where wages are concerned, low pay is still a problem. While some reported finding it difficult to make ends meet, low pay also contributes to the willingness of many workers to work excessively long working hours. Lacking financial security and with inadequate social insurance, the outlook is bleak for many of the workers as they approach retirement age.