CRIMT 2014
Achieving citizenship at work in the Global South: who, what and how

Tim Pringle
SOAS, University of London
tp21@soas.ac.uk
LABOUR AGENCY IN CHINA
Focussing on Guangdong
MAIN ARGUMENTS

• Class struggle is driving changes to labour relations especially Guangdong

• While the outcome of this struggle is rooted in the workplace, there is a concomitant impact on ‘citizenship’

• That the state is seeking ways to restore ‘harmony’ to labour relations including:
  – Slowing rates of informalisation
  – collective bargaining
CONTEXT

- Transition from a command economy to a market economy
- 15th Party Congress
- SOE restructuring
- Private capital and the ‘peasant worker’
- Particularities
  - Household registration
  - Absence of freedom of association
ALL CHINA FEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS (ACFTU)
ACFTU

- Huge!
- Party led
  - The main problem?
- Politically powerful
  - Organisationally weak
- Lack of experience in capitalist labour relations
  - (Probably) never led a strike
- Under pressure from below and above
  - Not a monolith
Barriers to citizenship at work

• Household registration
  – Exclusion from urban welfare
  – Peasant workers and the ACFTU
• ‘Working sister’ narratives/workers as children
• How capital engages with labour
  – ‘Nimble fingers’
  – Work deposits
  – Dormitory regime
  – Wage arrears
• Minimum wage – managing expectations?
• Guangdong
Guangdong

• Decentralisation 天高皇帝远
• Export orientated
  – Foreign direct investment
• Deeply integrated with world trade system
• Migration
• Feminisation
Political economy of Guangdong

• Led China’s jobs-led development project
• Re-shaped the relationship between state, capital and class
• ‘Pragmatic authoritarianism’ – the construction of a legal framework for labour relations
• Pioneered emergence of civil society
  – Qualified tolerance of NGOs
• Pioneered trade union reform
  – Trade union elections
  – Experiments with collective bargaining
• Pioneered changes to registration system
• Most labour-capital disputes
Removing the barriers to citizenship at work

• Rise of labour militancy
  – Labour shortages
  – Labour NGOs
  • Legal activism and rights consciousness

• Class consciousness
  – From rights to interests
  – From protests to strikes
Three key strikes

• Yantian port workers
  – increase wage
  – Workers select their own reps
• Honda auto workers
  – Increase wage
  – Re-organisation of trade union
• Yue Yuen shoe workers
  – Social insurance premiums
  – Watch this space...
Some thoughts...

• Globalisation and structural power
  – From ‘collective bargaining by riot’ to state-led collective bargaining

• Will it lead to greater associational power and a linked and led labour movement?
  – Sources of power
  – Relevance of union reform/renewal?

• Linking these developments to international labour movement
  – Strategies of solidarity in the ongoing absence of freedom of association