

Holding China's trade unions to account

China Labour Bulletin investigates the All-China Federation of Trade Union's reform initiative

What is China's trade union reform initiative?

Launched by China's paramount leader Xi Jinping in November 2015, the trade union reform initiative was supposed to shake up the overly bureaucratic and ineffective All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) and get it to focus on concrete measures that could help workers improve their pay and working conditions. China's Communist Party leaders were concerned that ordinary workers had not really benefited from the country's so-called "economic miracle," while the gap between rich and poor had grown exponentially. In order to address this serious issue, as well as safeguard its own political legitimacy, the Party needed the ACFTU to play its part in bringing about a more equitable distribution of wealth.

How effective has it been?

In the summer of 2018, China Labour Bulletin decided to investigate the effectiveness of the trade union reform initiative by talking directly to union officials on the ground about their response to labour disputes in their local area. From August 2018 to June 2019, we conducted about 250 telephone interviews with 95 local trade unions, based on 71 collective worker protests in 12 provinces that had been recorded on [CLB's Strike Map](#). We concluded that although the ACFTU has made some efforts to help protect and defend workers' rights, enterprise unions were still far removed from the workers they were supposed to represent, trade union officials had little understanding of what genuine collective bargaining entailed, and spent most of their time on activities unrelated to the core mission of a trade union.

What still needs to be done?

In the 30-page [Chinese-language report on our findings](#), which was sent to more than 100 trade union offices around the country, CLB argued that the ACFTU needed to undergo a fundamental restructuring of the organization that would place sectoral trade unions at its core. These new sectoral unions would then develop dedicated collective bargaining strategies for each industry at the provincial and eventually the national level. The report emphasised the need for the ACFTU to abandon its traditional role as a servant of the Party, dedicated to ensuring stable labour relations and economic development, and reposition itself as a representative of and advocate for workers that can act as a counterweight to the rampant greed and corruption evident in many enterprises.

How can international trade unions help?

Like many trade unions around the world, the ACFTU is struggling to come to terms with rapidly changing patterns of employment and the emergence of the gig economy. However, the ACFTU's difficulties have been exacerbated by its overly bureaucratic structure, its innate inertia, and its reluctance to get its hands dirty and actually organize workers. We would encourage international unions in a wide range of industries, but particularly those involved the gig economy, to reach out to their counterparts in the ACFTU and discuss the issues raised in CLB's report and hopefully establish a dialogue on the way forward for the trade union movement not just in China but globally. Meanwhile, CLB will continue to monitor and report on the impact of China's trade union reform initiative.