

CSCC Podcast Ep. 14: “The Evolution of Workers’ Rights in China – Mary Gallagher”

Introduction:

Welcome to the podcast of the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for the Study of Contemporary China. I’m your host, Neysun Mahboubi, and in today’s episode, you’ll hear my conversation, on “The Evolution of Workers’ Rights in China”, with Mary Gallagher, professor of political science at the University of Michigan, where she’s also the Director of the Center for Chinese Studies.

Now, identifying the precise ideology of the Chinese Communist Party, at any given moment in its close to 100 year history, may not be an easy task. But one relative constant—throughout the years and quite notably today, under President Xi Jinping—has been its formal adherence to Marxism. And, in the years immediately following the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, Chinese workers support for the Communist revolution was rewarded, in many instances, by the new state’s provision of the so-called “iron rice bowl”, guaranteeing job security and benefits in the planned economy.

Economic reform since the late 1970s, as well as the dynamics of globalization unleashed in full by China’s entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, have significantly complicated the relationship between the Chinese Party-state and Chinese workers. Some of this complexity was made apparent in the 1990s after millions of workers were laid off from state owned enterprises ... and then it was highlighted again, in a different form, in connection with worker suicides at Foxconn plants and strikes at Honda factories in Guangdong Province in 2010. Over the past six months, the gap between official rhetoric and state practice, as it relates to Chinese workers, has been perhaps most dramatically indicated by the ironic, and surprisingly harsh, crackdown on Marxist student groups and organizers at elite Chinese universities.

On the day this past December when police arrested the president of Peking University’s Marxist Society just outside that renowned institution’s East Gate, on his way to attend a memorial for the 125th anniversary of Mao Zedong’s birth, both Professor Gallagher and myself happened to be on campus too, meeting with our respective academic interlocutors. When she agreed to visit the University of Pennsylvania last month to present at a Law School symposium on China’s Belt and Road Initiative, it presented an excellent opportunity for us to record this episode as well, to place that jarring incident in much wider context.

Mary, who is an old friend, is a preeminent scholar of Chinese labor, and labor mobilization, among other topics in Chinese politics ... and given my own work, I especially appreciate the depth of her insights when it comes to the legal framework that surrounds, and is shaped by, Chinese workers. Her 2006 article in the *Law & Society Review* on “Mobilizing the Law in China: ‘Informed Disenchantment’ and the Development of Legal Consciousness” is one of my all-time favorites ... and those who are similarly law-minded will definitely want to check out her new book, published by Cambridge University Press, on *Authoritarian Legality in China: Law, Workers, and the State*, which persuasively challenges conventional understandings of how law operates in authoritarian countries.

Going forward, as China's economy continues to slow down, and the need to move away from the low-cost, labor-intensive production model that used to drive economic growth becomes ever more apparent, the status and expectations of Chinese workers will only become more prominent, in the thinking of both the leaders and observers of China alike. For a comprehensive and engaging overview of relevant issues in this area, as they have developed ... from the May 4th 1919 protest which inspired the birth of the Chinese Communist Party ... through the June 4th 1989 incident which shook it ... and up to the present day ... you are not likely to find a better resource than the discussion you're about to hear. So, with that promise, let me invite you, now, to my conversation with Professor Mary Gallagher.