

No. 137 (Cambridge)

Background (5/11/90, 3.5 hrs.)

Interview with a worker on the production line, making transistors in a Beijing electrical components factory that employs 1400 people. The informant left Beijing in March 1990 on an immigrant visa, and worked there until shortly before his departure. He is 32, a high school graduate, who worked for 12 years in the same factory, doing a two year apprenticeship, studying part-time for 3 years in a TV university in the mid-1980s.

Wages

When he began work in 1977, he drew an apprentice wage of 20+ yuan. Wages were low, but prices were too in those days, he says. After two years, he became a #1 worker at 34 yuan. In all, he has gotten 4 raises since then, each time a raise of 1 grade according to state regulated wage readjustments. In the beginning, seniority and wage level were the most important standards, in the early readjustment they allowed 40% to get raises of one grade each time if they qualified. Since 1988, they have given two general wage raises of one grade to all workers in his factory. This was because prices were rising so fast. They also started to give fushi butie of 7.5 yuan per month to everybody in the factory in 1987 or 1988, for the same reason, when inflation really started to get serious. No, they didn't give out any such supplements before then because inflation wasn't all that serious.

In 1979 and 1980 he made 34 yuan, was raised to 40 yuan in 1981, 47 yuan in 1984, and 56 yuan in 1986, when he became a grade 5 worker. In 1986 they began to employ a floating wage (fudong gongzi) system. Floating wages in theory vary by factory profit levels. After you complete your profit quota you can give out wages that are higher than the wages fixed to your grade by the state regulations. You can give higher wages by one or two grades. In this factory, the floating wages were implemented gradually, they increased the salaries gradually above the regulated levels. It has yet to go down in any month. The chemical industry, he says, does not pay as high as others, like steel and chemicals (he has friends that work at Shougang, and elsewhere). By the beginning of 1989, he was making the equivalent of grade 7 workers' wages, though he was still grade 5 according to his dang'an. His basic wage was 111 yuan per month when he left this year. Plants that do better can give higher wages than this. Everyone in his factory got a raise of one grade at the end of 1989. The main criterion has always been seniority. The number of raises given because of skill has always been small, only 1 to 5 percent of the total number of raises granted each time. All of this is done in accordance with regulations from above. If I left my unit, however, I would get whatever they paid a grade 5 worker in my new unit, not what I was making when I left.

There are big differences between industries, but not between factories within industries. For example, Capital Steel workers at the same grade as him get 3-400 yuan per month. Also chemicals and machine building get much higher wages. Electronics industry pay is low. The differences are very big. The state tried to regulate this, but many factories get special treatment. Tax rates on steel plants profits are lower than in our industry; 20% versus 60%.

Yes, they did make workers buy government savings bonds (guojia zhaijuan) last

year. But they did that every year after 1983 in our factory. You had no choice. They just deducted the amount from your paycheck and gave you bonds instead. 5 year bonds at a total compounded interest rate of 13.2% over the entire life of the bond. The state gave quotas to each factory for this. Sometimes factories used their own money to buy some; others just made workers buy them. Last October in our factory, every worker in the factory had to take 40% of their monthly salary in bonds. Just once. Different levels in different factories. I got 60 yuan worth. Interest is higher than in the bank, but workers don't like this because with inflation they'll be worth a lot less in the future. We don't like it but mei banfa. We didn't worry about it too much because our wages were still going up fast.

Bonuses

When he began work, there were no bonuses. Only basic wages and overtime. Sometimes they gave out things like chickens and fish as rewards at the end of the year, also shirts, pants, cotton cloth.

Now the floating wages are the basic wage; but we still have bonuses, though not large. These are according to the factory's performance, the manager has the power to set them. About 15 yuan per month, paid out at 45 yuan each quarter the last year or so.

We also had year end bonuses. Last year, end of 1989, got 200 yuan. Equal for everyone, except if you are absent more than 4 days per month, no bonus at all. 48 days for the entire year. Our bonuses were considered small in Beijing. Wages are higher at Capital Steel because their bonuses are much higher, not their basic wage.

There are also bonuses called gangwei jintie. Leaders get these. In reality these are bonuses. The plant director5 got 50 yuan a month. Shop director 30 yuan. All workers know about this. They also get bonuses that are higher than workers. Shop directors get 1.7 times the basic bonus for workers, the plant director 2.2 times. There are big differences in wages and bonuses now within the factory. There are smaller differences between shops too; some get more if their efficiency is more, like 1.1 or 1.2 times the basic. 1.0 is the jiben jiang for all, then it may rise for others who get larger shares. Cadres have the power to decide these bonuses, after they go through the congress of workers and staff (zhidai hui).

The zhidaihui is not really representative. Its just like the national people's congress. Workers elect usually the older workers. There are also a lot of middle level cadres in it. Its an empty shell (kong jiazi). Workers still don't really dare raise serious yijian. Still they are a little afraid of cadres. Workers do complain sometimes, but its not much use.

Punishments (Service Company)

They can still give you small shoes to wear, like in the 1970s. The main method is to give you a worse job assignment, one that's harder or busier. Another punishment for workers who give problems is to transfer them to the service company (fuwu gongsi). All the shop director has to do is say that he no longer wants to employ (pinren) you, and you go to the service company. Too many workers? They send you there and your wages are no longer guaranteed. If they don't have work for you to do, you go home and get 60 percent of your basic wage and no bonuses. Some people do like this, but for many its a punishment.

The service company does anything that can earn money, like babysitting in

foreign embassies, or doing getihu type of private business buying and selling on the streets. One way is to sign a contract with the company to turn over a certain amount in profit every month, they give you the initial investment in return and help you arrange places to buy the goods. The factory uses this to get excessive personnel off of the payroll and save money, and also to get rid of troublesome workers. About half of the 200 or so people in the service company went there voluntarily; they all came from regular jobs in the plant. Some went voluntarily because they thought they might make more money; but the rest were sent to save money or as punishment.

There are also workers who take leave and go off to do business on their own. They don't do this with a doctors' certificate anymore. They just agree with the service company to turn over a certain amount of money every month, and then they get in return the basic wage, insurance, and so forth. Its not so easy to get sick leave certificates as before. The relations between the factory and the contracting hospitals are now tight and that kind of thing is very rare now.

Outside Income

Some people with ability also have businesses on the side to earn more money. They sell vegetables, cigarettes. They just buy and sell. Can't earn much doing that though. Its not easy to find outside work using your skills, like repairing electrical appliances. Usually you have to go through the unit to do this.

For example, we found a job building a computer for a research institute. We got permission from our unit to work on this after hours. The computer cost 20,000 yuan in all. After the shift, we worked on it. The factory gave us equipment and parts. The factory got 18,000 yuan, we only got 2000 to split up among 10 of us. That came to 200 yuan apiece for a month and a half of work. This kind of opportunity is still rare.

There are workers who just quit their jobs to become getihu. Especially in 1987 and 1988, this became more common. I knew 5 or 6 who did this in my unit. They did it for the money. Those who were confident about their ability to make money didn't worry about losing their benefits. They can make 1000 yuan a month often, this is not uncommon. Mostly from buying and selling, touji daoba. We call them daoye or xiaodao. Everything you can imagine is bought and resold these days, like train tickets. These days everyone is looking for an opportunity to make money after work, but its not easy.

Changing jobs is still hard. Too many workers all over. Other units don't want more. If you have skills, your unit won't let you go. They have rencai jiaoliu zhongxin now. This is run by the Beijing labor bureau, who provides introductions to new units. If your unit lets you go, you transfer your dang'an to the center, and try to get an introduction to a new work unit.

Benefits

Our unit doesn't have much housing, like Capital Steel. Only 70 apartments built by the unit. But if a worker gets a factory apartment the unit can distribute the apartment he vacates. Its very difficult for young workers in their 30s to get apartments. Its basically impossible to move to a larger apartment if you have one.. I lived with my parents, because I'm not married. Some buy their own apartments now, but it is really much too expensive for workers. But grandparents sometimes buy for their grandchildren. A two bedroom apartment with kitchen and bathroom, 50 square meters, will cost about 120,000 yuan in Beijing now.

We had a housing committee (fengfang weiyuanhui). Representatives from each shop; leaders, people like representatives to workers' congress. They set up a point system. The committee was temporary, only set up when there were apartments to distribute. They considered your current housing situation (square meters per person), whether you had 3 generations under one roof, whether your spouse had a unit to get housing from, your seniority, whether both spouses worked in unit, what your position is (leaders get more, of course).

These are the criteria for comparing and balancing. Points are given for each thing. There is no possibility to get housing from the city. Only your unit--unless the city takes the land from where you are currently living. That way you can get new housing from the city. The last building they built in our unit, most of the apartments went to middle ranking cadres; their seniority is usually highest anyway. Of course workers have an opinion about this, especially those who also have high seniority and didn't get it.

The final decision is made by the plant director's office, either the director himself or one of the 4 vice-directors. So complaints go directly to their office. One woman, over 50, complained loudly last time. She went to the director's office to complain and ask why the decision was made that way. She cried and yelled, stressed her difficult housing situation and long seniority. The director gave in a bit and gave her an old apartment, one of the ones the people getting new apartments were moving out of. Usually cadres will give in a bit if the person really has a serious problem.

Your relations with others will influence whether you get housing. Its really not reasonable. if everyone hates you, and the people on the committee don't like you, you just don't have much chance. Cadre bias also can affect this.

Housing is the biggest problem, it does affect work from time to time. Better work units have made the housing situation better for their workers in the 1980s, but the ones like ours really haven't been able to. We still have the iron rice bowl, despite what they say in the papers. We still have xiaoji daigong. No real difference whether you work hard or not.

Living Standards, Work Units

A lot of workers want to leave the unit, but its very hard to get a new unit. To be a getihu, you have to be out of work. Otherwise you can't get a business license from the bureau of industry and commerce, and you can't do business. You also have to have some savings enough to get started; workers don't usually have this much. There is also risk. Also, you have to think about medical insurance, housing (you have to leave unit housing if you quit), pension. So its rare and difficult for workers to become getihu. But there are some, mostly young, who have left the unit to do this. A couple of them I know have done really well, saving over 10,000 yuan.

Generally, a middle-aged worker is doing well if he's saved 1000 yuan. A color TV is 3000 yuan, a small refrigerator 2000, a washing machine 500. A flying pigeon bicycle is around 200. Generally today if you have money, there is no problem at all to buy the better consumer items. There were some shortages in the mid-1980s, but now there are plenty of high quality items around.

There are plenty of import items on the market now, he thinks because of the official profiteering (guandao). Cadres are taking government money and setting up illegal import businesses. A lot of things are getting in this way. Also black market and speculation is prevalent. Prices are going up fast on these items. A color TV was 1700

yuan in 1986. Now its 3000. Now you can walk right into a department store and walk out with a Hitachi color TV, its that simple. Two years ago you couldn't do this.

Recently they reinstated ration coupons for pork, eggs, sugar, soap, matches. This is in part because people from outside Beijing were coming in and buying these things up. In state stores, one jin of eggs costs 1.5-1.8 yuan. Its 2.5 on the free market. Prices for food have gone up a lot too, and that's where inflation is most pressing.

Workers and 1989 Protests

A lot of workers supported the students, almost all sympathized with them, even if they never went out on the streets. In our factory, production was not greatly affected. Workers thought that inflation was caused by corruption, and that if there was more democracy, there would be less corruption. That is why workers supported the students. The students' slogans appealed to them.

In our unit, workers didn't really participate until the newspapers and TV came out to support the students. Then they really got involved. Workers then began to become active and took part more in the activities downtown. The cadres didn't know what to do once the newspapers came out this way. Should they support the students or not? After May 4, the newspapers changed, and they were not sure what to do. In our unit they neither prevented people from going, nor encouraged them to go. They just said, "if you want to go, then go."

Most people in the factory, cadres included, really sympathized with the students' aims. Our unit's mid-level cadres didn't sent workers out in trucks, though this happened in other factories. In our unit, workers got together and talked, decided to go together to the square, took the trucks without asking for them (but cadres didn't punish them for this). Cadres let them go because they weren't sure what to do. If they acted to prevent them, they might get in trouble later. Workers also collected donations in our factory and then went off to take the money to the square. About 10 percent of the workers took part in an organized way in these activities. Most went on their own, either taking leave and going or going down after work or on days off. Most of us did this. Other factories were not like us, but in our production was not greatly influenced.

Workers aren't like students. They aren't all that interested in ideas about democracy or politics. They had gone through the Cultural Revolution and they weren't interested in politics anymore. Workers have families, have worries. So the government can generally count on them.

Two factors were very important: student slogans against corruption, which everybody hated, and concern over inflation. Second, the papers supported the students and TV too, that was also very important. Our attendance from mid-May to early June was 40-50% of normal. Not all who weren't there were participating in the movement. The bus lines weren't running so we found it difficult to get to work.

Those who did come to work during this period spent much of their time talking about the movement. But we normally didn't have a lot of work lately anyway, so the damage to production was not that great.

Workers didn't have any clear impression of leadership splits at the top. It wasn't that clear to us. Mainly, we responded to the calls in the papers to support the students. After the papers changed their stance at the end of May, the cadres then demanded that workers come back to work, and started to pass regulations to come back to work even if the buses weren't running. Generally, if you had a good reason for not coming, it was ok.

During the movement, relations between the masses and cadres were very good; they became very polite, relations became closer than ever, because we all sympathized with the students and their demands. It wasn't like our normal everyday relations. We had a common language, common desires, there were no problems, we could solve any small conflicts easily. We got along.

Aftermath

After the movement, everybody had 3 full days of political study, no work at all. We watched videos, listened to reports, raised our consciousness about the counterrevolutionary riot, turned our thinking around. Workers didn't believe this, of course not. This didn't change our thinking, though we didn't say anything. This is the majority, but there were some workers who from the beginning didn't support the students, though that the disorder would disrupt their lives.

After the political study for three days it was over. At least on the surface. But in workers minds, their thinking was complicated because they still sympathized. Workers commonly grumble and make cynical remarks (guaihua) about the national leaders now. During the movement, workers liked to imitate the mannerisms and speech of Li Peng when he was meeting with the students on TV. He seemed so strange looking, ill at ease and nervous. Li Peng is really disliked very much. Since June 4, we have not had any more political study, but now we have to listen to government reports more often than before.

Workers Politics

Workers have higher standards of living than before, and this is due to the reform and opening, and they welcomed it. Our factory, for example, had plans for a joint venture with American Express to build an office building and restaurant on factory land. But it may not come about now. But this kind of business is very advantageous to the factories, because workers who can't be used in the factory can work in the building or restaurant, and a lot of money goes to the factory to build housing and other things. There are a lot of joint ventures like this that involve land in Beijing right now.

Most workers don't understand what anti bourgeois liberalization is all about. And they aren't at all concerned about it. This is just in the intellectual realm. Workers talk about politics now among their friends; still sympathize with worker demands, but its not the main part of their lives. If they still get their bonuses they will be basically satisfied. They're mainly concerned about their families.

Nobody in the unit was arrested for political activities during the movement. But last year they did have a campaign against pornography (saohuang yundong). Against pornography, prostitution, gambling, feudal superstitions. There were no activities in the unit, but in society there were. The police did arrest people from our unit for gambling then. They were educated and released. Also in our unit we had people who had pornographic videotapes, copied them and passed them on. The police fined them if they found out. Did the same to fortune-tellers.

The supply of goods got better after June 4, because the government tried very hard to solve living problems of the citizens. Inflation has gotten a lot better now. Beginning early 1989, the banks started to raise interest rates on deposits to compensate for high inflation (baozhi chuxu).

Corruption

From around 1988 on, basic level cadres in the government became more and more corrupt. For example, if you needed a business license, you'd have to pay them; police would demand bribes for not reporting you for things. They have gotten to the point where these small officials ask openly for money. They demand it just for doing what they are paid to do. This is what people are really most upset about: they say you qian bu ru you quan.

This kind of thing is not that prevalent in buying and selling; its mainly among small government officials. This kind of thing also occurs in work units, for example in giving out apartments, yi quan mo si.

I ran into this myself in getting paperwork done to leave the country. I felt it necessary to get a friend who knew someone in the office to go with me so I wouldn't have to deal with it. Otherwise they would give me all kinds of trouble, make me fill out the form again and come back. Its more convenient this way, otherwise they give you a hard time. So your generally have to get someone who knows somebody to avoid the problems and help you get things done. I ran into this kind of thing on a trip to Canton. I needed to get back to Beijing fast to leave the country before long. Couldn't get a train ticket. Some guy in the host unit got a ticket for me, then when he gave it to me he asked for some money for his trouble.

In the 1980s, the papers always said that workers living standards were getting better every year, but in reality it hasn't risen that much. True, workers have TVs and other modern commodities now. But thats because all of society is developing, not because workers living standards are rising. Other than a few modernized commodities, our lives haven't really gotten all that much better. But everybody's getting better off, not just workers, and some others are much better off than before. Workers sympathized with the student movement this time because their slogans represented their true inner wishes. But I think workers will think carefully next time before supporting students openly again. June 4 was a big lesson that they will not want to repeat. Every movement has given people lessons like this; next time we'll be more careful.