Beyond the Union-Centred Approach: A Critical Evaluation of Recent Trade Union Elections in China

Elaine Sio-ieng Hui and Chris King-chi Chan

Abstract

Many Western scholars have regarded union democracy and elections as affairs that are internal to trade unions and unconnected with outside forces. Going beyond the mainstream union-centred approach, this study critically assesses one significant type of union election that has been emerging in China since 2010 and that has been driven by different forces from previous elections. Previous workplace union elections had been ‘top-down’ — initiated by the party-state or its apparatuses, or else transnational corporation-induced — but this newer type of election has been driven by workers’ strikes. This study illustrates how the dynamics among the quadripartite actors — party-state, higher-level trade unions, capital and labour — have shaped these strike-driven elections. Contrary to the claim that these elections have been ‘direct’ and ‘democratic’, our case studies show that they have been indirect and quasi-democratic in nature.

1. Introduction

Many Western scholars (e.g. Hughes 1968; Turner 1962; Webb and Webb 1896) have regarded union democracy and elections as internal affairs of trade unions that do not operate in connection with outside forces, such as the state or employers. For instance, following Michels’ idea of the ‘iron law of oligarchy’ (1962), Goldstein (1952) argued that full-time trade union officials in Britain could easily get around the democratic mechanism within trade unions because of the low level of member participation. Clegg (1979) analysed the characteristics of British trade unions that could turn them into oligarchies. Focusing on procedural democracy, Taft (1956) studied the degree to which the election process of union officials and the treatment of
unions’ finances in the USA are democratic. Strauss (1977) summarized from the past research three criteria — legal, behavioural, responsiveness and control — for measuring local union democracy in the USA. Kelly and Heery (1994) explicated how elected union leaders in Britain try to maintain their positions by fending off challenges to their authority with their expertise and the unions’ resources. Comparing the trade unions in the USA and Britain, Edelstein and Warner (1975) suggested that the extent to which elections for union officials are contested and the turnover rate of incumbent officials are two key indicators of union democracy. Following the approach of Edelstein and Warner, Strauss (2000) took the union presidential elections as a measure of union democracy and concluded that unions in the USA have become more democratic. Levi et al. (2009) were concerned about participatory democracy and considered members’ active participation within the trade union as a key measurement of a union’s democracy.

This article contends that the dominant union-centred approach can hardly capture the new development of trade union politics in China. As Clarke reminded us, it is inappropriate to analyse post-socialist trade unions within the ‘theoretical frameworks developed through the analysis of trade unions that have grown up in capitalist societies’ (Clarke 2005). Following the neo-Marxist perspective advanced by Hyman (1975), which highlights both the internal and external constraints facing trade unions with regard to union democracy, this article argues that due to the socialist legacy of China, trade union elections and democracy can only be properly understood when the union–state, union–management and union–workers relations in the transition period are seriously considered. Going beyond the union-centred approach, this study examines the post-2010 strike-driven trade union elections in China.

Industrial relations in China have undergone substantial changes since 1978, as the country has shifted from a command economy to a market economy and been gradually incorporated into global capitalism. With the large-scale privatization of state-owned enterprises and the increasing inflow of foreign investment in the private sector, the Chinese workers have become vulnerable in the labour market, and have been subjected to unfair and often illegal treatment at work (Chan 2001; Lee 1998). The party-controlled trade unions, which some scholars call sham trade unions (Taylor and Li 2010), a transmission belt (Chan 2008; Warner 1996), government bureaucracy (Friedman 2009) and party apparatus (Lee 2006), have failed to protect workers against unscrupulous employers. This has induced widespread extra-trade union activism in the country. Specifically, strikes bypassing official trade unions have become a vital means through which Chinese workers safeguard their interests in the face of capitalist exploitation (Chan 2011; Chan 2010). In 2010, the Honda workers’ strike sparked a country-wide wave of strikes in China (Chan and Hui 2012; Hui 2011).

Increasing labour militancy has created huge pressure on both the Chinese government and the official trade unions to promote at the enterprise level
what is officially called ‘direct elections’ (zhixuan) (Jingbao 2012; Zhongguo Caifu 2012) or ‘democratic elections’ (minzhu xuanju) (Guangdong Federation of Trade Unions (GDFTU) 2012b; Nanfang Daily 2012b; Yangcheng Wanbao 2010), especially in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) of Guangdong Province. At the national level, on 5 June 2010, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) issued a document entitled ‘Reinforcing the Building of Workplace Trade Unions and Giving Them Full Play’ (ACFTU 2010), which stated that workplace trade union elections should be conducted in accordance with the law. In August 2010, the then Vice Chair of the ACFTU, Mr. Wang Yu Pu, noted in a national meeting on trade unions’ grass-root organizing that trade unions ‘in enterprises that have mature conditions should explore the possibility of holding direct election of trade union chair; they should ensure that the elections can truly reflect the true preferences of members and that the elected chair can represent workers, voice out for them and act for them’ (Liaowang 2012). In March 2012, the ACFTU sent an investigation team to Guangzhou to study the implementation of ‘democratic elections’ in enterprises, and in June it extended this research to Shenzhen (GDFTU 2012a). At the provincial level, the then Deputy Chair of the Guangdong Provincial Federation of Trade Unions (GDFTU), Mr. Kong Xiang Hong, confirmed in June 2010 that the federation would speed up the democratization of plant trade unions, and he announced that a pilot scheme for the ‘democratic election’ of workplace trade union presidents would be conducted in 10 factories (Takungpao 2010). At the city level, the Deputy Head of the Shenzhen Federation of Trade Unions (SZFTU), Mr. Wang Tongxin, announced a plan to organize union elections in 163 enterprises in Shenzhen in 2012 (Liaowang 2012). In August 2012, the SZFTU issued the ‘Opinions on Further Strengthening the Organizing of Enterprise Trade Unions’, which states that democratic elections should be organized in enterprises (Nanfang Daily 2012c). In Guangzhou, the Measures on the Candidates for the Elections of Guangzhou Enterprise Trade Union Chairperson and Interim Measures on Appointing Trade Union Inspectors to Instruct the Elections of Grass-Root Trade Union Chairperson were issued in 2011 to guide enterprise trade union elections (Nanfang Gongbao 2011). And the new Chair of the Guangzhou Federation of Trade Unions (GZFTU 2013), Ms. Zhao Xiao Wei, highlighted that enterprise unions elections should be organized in accordance with the laws.

This study investigates the post-2010 wave of trade union elections that resulted from this revived attention to ‘direct elections’ or ‘democratic elections’ in enterprise trade unions. In China, union officials at the enterprise level are generally appointed, not elected (Taylor and Li 2007). Furthermore, chairpersons of enterprise trade unions are usually concurrently Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cadres, local government officers or senior managers of the enterprises (CLB 2007). However, enterprise union elections are not completely foreign to China, and some experimental elections have been held in various parts of the country since the 1980s. Most of the plant union
elections that have taken place in the past decades were either top-down-initiated (by the higher-level trade unions or the party-state) or transnational corporation (TNC)-induced.

The first example of top-down-initiated elections took place in 1986 in the Shekou industrial zone in Shenzhen (Nanfang Daily 2012a). A few companies were involved in this pilot scheme. However, ‘direct elections’ did not spread to other areas of the country, and over time the so-called direct elections in the original companies have become a formality, as management heavily influences the selection of candidates. Howell (2008) studied the enterprise trade union elections initiated by reformers within the national and provincial trade unions in the province of Guangdong, Shandong and Zhejiang since the mid-1990s. She concluded that a democratic trade union model could not be sustained and expanded in China as it was not supported by the conservative ACFTU cadres, the party-state and foreign investors. Howell’s study focused on the political arena, and she concluded that direct elections could only be widely adopted when ‘there is a shift in the political context, either because of regime crisis or because of political liberalization’ (Howell 2008). Howell’s state-centred approach casts light on the internal dynamics of the ACFTU and the party-state, but she neglected the role of labour as a crucial social force that shapes the development of direct elections and trade union democracy in China. More recently, Pringle (2011) examined two top-down-initiated enterprise elections organized by the Yuyao (city) Federation of Trade Unions and the Yuhang Federation of Trade Unions in Zhejiang during the 2000s. He argued that there was no solid evidence that union elections in Zhejiang had improved workers’ pay and working conditions or the effectiveness of the ACFTU; this was partly because of the dependency of the elected unions on employers and the lack of support from higher-levels of the union organizations. Unlike Howell’s state-centred perspective, Pringle did not place much hope on the ACFTU or the state to drive the development of union elections. He contended that labour unrest will increase the pressure on the ACFTU to ‘further improve its effectiveness in representing workers’ legitimate rights and interests’ (Pringle 2011).

In addition to top-down-initiated elections by the party-state or its apparatuses, there have been a few TNC-induced elections in recent years (A. Chan 2009; Yu 2008). These elections have usually been requested by TNCs and are an echo of the strong consumer movement in Western countries. Under the umbrella of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes, the TNCs ask their supplying factories in China to conduct such elections. In response to pressures from overseas consumer groups and labour non-governmental organizations, CSR programmes have become quite common in China since the 1990s. In her study of the elections initiated by Reebok in the early 2000s in two subcontractors in Shenzhen and Fuzhou, Chan (2009) suggested that elections prompted by CSR programmes have not led to the independence of the trade unions from the enterprises’ management. Chan stressed the leverage that TNCs have over their suppliers in China and argued that the pilot elections programmes could have worked
better had the relevant TNC applied stronger pressure to its suppliers and given more support to the elected unions (Chan 2009). Chan was right to pay attention to the power relations between the TNCs and their subcontractors when analysing the union elections in China in the context of global production chains. However, she seemed to have placed too much hope in the TNCs, which were the key drivers of and the biggest beneficiaries in the global game of the race to the bottom. CSR programmes have long been criticized as public relations ploys of the TNCs (Chan 2013; Pun 2005), and the TNC-induced elections were most likely another piece of window dressing. The union elections recently held in Foxconn, an electronic supplier of many global brands including Apple, were another example of TNC-induced elections (Financial Times 2013). In 2010, at least 14 Foxconn workers committed suicide in their factory dormitories (Huffpost Tech 2012), which raised concern over its militaristic managerial style. The wave of workers’ suicides and resistance in Foxconn continued in the subsequent years (Students & Scholars Against Corporate Misbehaviour (SACOM) 2013). Under the pressure from Apple, in February 2013 Foxconn agreed to organize union elections in its Chinese factories. However, according to a survey conducted by a group of students and scholars, 90.2 per cent of the workers-interviewees in Foxconn were unaware of the union elections and 94.7 per cent of them had not voted in the elections (SACOM 2013). Moreover, the Foxconn spokesperson made it clear in a media interview that ‘union elections have never been on Foxconn’s agenda’ (SACOM 2013). As these cases have shown, the TNCs are not likely to truly embrace trade union elections, which probably will increase their labour costs.

The recent strike-driven trade union elections are significantly different from previous ones in terms of their driving force. They are neither top-down-initiated nor TNC-induced; rather they have been instigated by workers’ strikes, forming what we call workers’ strike-driven elections. We examine this new wave of elections with a somewhat different approach than that of the aforementioned studies and the mainstreamed union-centred approach in the Western literature. Instead of seeing top-down forces (the party-state or TNCs) as critical to the elections, we argue that workers’ activism from below is the main impetus for the recent elections, but the implementation of the elections is shaped by the dynamics among the quadripartite actors — the party-state, higher-level trade unions, labour and capital — and in fact the elections reflect the balance of forces between these actors in the post-strike industrial relations.

In brief, this article makes three intellectual contributions by engaging with two academic fields: industrial relations and China labour studies. First, similar to Hyman (1975), we bring in external factors to the study of workplace trade union elections in China. By delving into the Chinese cases, we go beyond the Western union-centred approach to elucidate that union elections are not only internal affairs of unions, but are also shaped by forces external to them. Second, instead of assuming union elections in China to have the same nature and characteristics, this article provides three categories of union
elections (top-down driven by the party-state, TNC-induced and strike-driven). This helps analyse the historical and future development of union elections in China. Third, we examine how the dynamics among the quadrupartite actors (state, higher-level union, management and workers) have shaped strike-driven elections in China, as well as the obstacles to the transformation of workers’ workplace bargaining power (as expressed in their strikes) into associational power (as expressed in democratic trade unionism) (Silver 2003; Wright 2000). These questions have significant implications for the future development of Chinese industrial relations and the Chinese labour movement.

We illustrate our argument by focusing on the PRD where we investigated eight factories in the cities of Shenzhen, Foshan and Guangzhou from September 2012 to March 2013. At the enterprise level, we interviewed 100 workers, three trade union members’ representatives (gonghui huiyuan dabiao), five enterprise union officials (gonghui weiyuan) and three union chairs. In addition, we conducted participant observation in some trade unions’ activities (such as the staff and workers’ congress and meetings among the enterprise union officials) and workers’ gatherings. Due to space limitations, we do not elaborate on all of the eight cases; instead we examine closely two factories: Autoco, an automobile spare part factory in Foshan, and Eleco, an electronic factory in Shenzhen. We choose these factories as case studies because their elections were praised by the government and the higher-level trade unions and were widely reported in the media. Furthermore, they reflect the situations in two geographical areas (Shenzhen and Foshan) and in the two most important industries in the PRD (the automobile and electronic industries). The examination of these two factories was embedded into the analysis of the eight cases and the larger development of union elections in China. To increase our ability to generalize from these cases, we supplemented the case studies by interviewing five trade unionists at the district, city and provincial level, four labour scholars, and by conducting a systemic review of Internet materials, media reports, trade union documents and government reports. Moreover, we have carried out intensive fieldwork in China since 2005. This gives us insight into the development of union elections over a significant period of time.

As mentioned above, union elections in China can be seriously evaluated only if the history and politics of Chinese trade unions are properly understood. Section 2 of this article takes up this task. Section 3 examines the workers’ strike-driven elections in the PRD and discusses to what extent they can solve the dilemmas facing the trade unions in the transition era. The concluding section throws light on the possibilities and limitations of democratic trade unionism in China.

2. Changing politics and trade unionism in China

During the state-socialist era, Chinese trade unions did not represent workers vis-à-vis the management because both groups were regarded as employees of
the state enterprises. Instead, they acted as intermediaries between the party-
state and the workers (Clarke 2005; Ding et al. 2002). Under CCP’s leader-
ship, they transmitted top-down instructions from the party-state to workers,
and mobilized the latter to support the former’s propaganda and production.
In the other direction, they were given a monopoly status to organize
workers’ welfare, and transmitted workers’ concerns upward for the party-
state’s consideration (Pringle and Clarke 2011). This was the state corporatist
structure in the pre-reformed China (Chan 1993; Howell 2008; Unger and
Chan 1995), which continued through the reform era.

After China’s transition to a market economy, the state-socialist protec-
tion system for workers was dismantled and workers subsisted by selling their
labour power. Thus, antagonism between labour and capital, which was
considered non-existent in the state-socialist period, became part of indus-
trial relations in the reform period. Despite attempts to readjust their role,
Chinese trade unions have by and large failed to adequately safeguard
workers’ interests, and many workers find them unable to address their
concerns. This is because, concerning the state–union relations, they have
retained a ‘double institutional identity’, trying to simultaneously play the
roles of state apparatus and labour organization (Chen 2003). When these
two roles are not in opposition, the unions will act as labour organizations.
However, their role as state apparatus prevails over their role as labour
organization whenever the two roles are in conflict. This explains why the
trade unions actively provide assistance to individual workers who pursue
state-sanctioned legal means to resolve industrial conflicts, but they attempt
to defuse or even dampen workers’ strikes if these actions are seen as endan-
gering social and political stability. The second reason for the trade unions’
failure to advance workers’ rights is related to union–management relations.
Chen (2009) succinctly argued that the higher-level trade unions, especially
the national and local federations, have been incorporated into the govern-
ment bureaucracy, and that the workplace trade unions remain susceptible to
managerial manipulation. As the power of higher-level unions is based on
their identity as state organs, not on the organization of rank-and-file
workers, their administrative power can ‘hardly be translated into muscle in
the workplace unions’ (Chen 2009). Without strong associational power
based on the effective organization of workers, management can easily domi-
nate and manipulate workplace unions.

To cope with the immense pressures created by escalating workers’ unrest,
the higher-level trade unions have adopted three major measures — union
building, workplace collective negotiation and trade union elections — to
strengthen their role as labour organizations (Liaowang 2012). The first
measure, trade union building, is necessary because large-scale privatization
of the state enterprises in the reform period led to a steep decline in union
membership; since 1998, the ACFTU has began to actively establish union
branches in the foreign-invested enterprises (FIEs). The unionization cam-
paign was further strengthened after 2006 by the increasing number of
workers’ protests (Chan 2010). As a consequence, the number of ACFTU’s
enterprise affiliates has increased tremendously. However, because of the quota system used in union building, many newly formed unions are simply ‘paper unions’ (Taylor and Li 2007). Moreover, the ACFTU has deployed new strategies to organize workers, for instance, using workers’ collective actions to pressure enterprises to set up unions, and developing three new organizational forms of unions to organize workers who are easily left out under the current organizing structures. Taylor and Li have argued that despite these new strategies, ACFTU’s motivations remain unchanged, and the party-state’s aim of containing labour unrest continues to be a crucial driving force in this effort (Taylor and Li 2010).

The second strategy for increasing trade unions’ representational role has been to promote workplace collective negotiation, or what is officially called collective consultation. Although collective consultation has existed for a long time in China, such consultation has usually been a formality (Chan 1998; Clarke et al. 2004). It was the recent workers’ strikes that forced ‘collective bargaining by riot’ upon management (Chan and Hui 2014). To forestall ‘collective bargaining by riot’, the government currently seeks to promote a party-state-led approach to collective negotiation through the official trade unions. These party-state-led collective negotiations differ substantially from the workers-led collective bargaining found in many Western countries; the former is built upon top-down state authority, whereas the latter is based on workers’ associational power and the rights to strike and organize independently (Chan and Hui 2014). The third measure taken by the higher-level unions is to promote union elections at the plant level, which is a key concern of this study. In the following section, we closely examine the new wave of strike-driven elections in the PRD and discuss to what extent they can stabilize the volatile industrial relations.

3. Workers’ strikes-driven elections in the PRD

The new type of union elections in the PRD reflects a new socio-political and economic context. At the level of industrial relations, despite the attempts of the ACFTU and the party-state to contain labour unrest, exploitative working conditions, skyrocketing inflation, the widening income gap and the failure of the unions to represent their members’ interests continue to fuel workers’ strikes, as exemplified by the country-wide waves of strikes ignited by the Honda workers in 2010. At the economic level, serious labour shortages have compelled the Guangdong government to allow higher minimum wages and better labour policies, including union elections, to stabilize employment relations (interviews with a provincial trade unionist, 27 December 2012). Furthermore, the plan to upgrade the industries in the Guangdong region from low-end to high-end industries has freed the government from concerns about small-scale and uncompetitive enterprises, which usually cannot afford organized labour in the form of trade unions. In other words, union elections, as a means to overhaul the Chinese trade unions, are now
seen by the party-state and the union federations as a way to mitigate the intensifying labour conflicts, which will not impose significant negative effects on the labour market or the economy. (To a certain extent, the strategy is also regarded as helping to drive the bad coins out.) Against this larger socioeconomic background, we examine the new type of elections using two in-depth case studies.

**The Autoco Case**

The Autoco workers staged an extra-trade union strike in May 2010, which involved over 1,800 workers and lasted for 17 days. In addition to higher wages and better welfare, workers also demanded democratic union elections. They argued that the trade union chair, who was the deputy head of the business management department, represented the management’s interests rather than the workers’. The strikers’ representatives issued an open letter reiterating their demands, including democratic elections. In the end, the workers’ wages were raised from 1544 yuan to 2044 yuan, and the then vice president of the GDFTU arranged a number of meetings in June and July 2010 with some of the strike leaders to discuss union elections (interviews with a strike representative, 1 August 2010). He revealed that there were plans to organize union elections and collective bargaining in Autoco. However, he denied the request of the strikers’ representatives to remove the existing union chair and insisted that workers should give him ‘a chance to correct himself’. In addition, he warned the strike representatives that independent trade unionism is not allowed in China and that trade union reform in Autoco should be carried out within the legal framework. He also reminded one of the key strike leaders not to have any contact with any foreign forces, as he probably knew that she was in touch with some outside supporters during the strike (interviews with a strike representative, 1 August 2010).

Subsequently, union elections were held in Autoco from September to November 2010. Figure 1 shows how the Autoco trade union structure was reformed after the strike. Before the strike, there existed only the trade union members’ representatives (less than a hundred in number), union executive committee members (seven in total) and the union chair. However, many workers, including those who had worked in the company since its establishment in 2007, were unaware of the existence of the union members’ representatives before the strike; this suggests they were not properly elected by the workers. As part of the trade union reform, the union organization was expanded to include union division representatives (gonghui xiaozu daibiao) and a union branch committee (gonghui fenhui weiyuan). The former were elected at the division level (ban), whereas the latter was elected at the departmental level (ke). The overarching trade union structure was broadened to improve the union–workers relations. Moreover, the post-strike elections had two other purposes: the election of five more union executive committee members and two vice chairs. To prepare for these elections, an
The election preparatory committee was established to decide the electoral rules and regulations. This committee comprised existing seven union committee members, whom our worker interviewees said were not elected through proper elections (if there were any at all), two trade union members’ representatives and two staff and workers’ representatives (zhigong daibiao), whom workers were not aware of before the strike, and two strike representatives. Among these 13 people, only one was a rank-and-file worker and two were lower-level supervisory workers; the others were managerial staff. One of the election preparatory committee members told us that the district- and town-level trade union officials attended all of their meetings, giving suggestions and commenting on the electoral procedures (interviews with workers, December 2010).

There were seven departments in Autoco, each consisting of a number of divisions. Altogether there were about 72 divisions in the company. At the first stage of the union reform, workers in each division elected their division representatives with the ‘sea election’ method. This means that there were no candidates for the position; workers just put down the name of the person they supported on the ballot paper. The worker who got the most support from his/her colleagues became the division representative. At the second stage, the elections for the seven union branch committee members were held at the departmental level. The elected division representatives in each department first used the sea election method to elect four candidates from among the division representatives to run for the branch committee. These candidates were subject to the approval of the higher-level trade unions.
Subsequently, the workers in the whole department voted to select three branch committee members out of the four candidates. The candidate with the highest number of votes in this election became the branch chair. These two levels of elections were quite direct and democratic, but this was not the case in the election of the union committee and the vice chair.

The union executive committee, including the chair and vice chair, is the centre of power in the union structure; the union division and branch committees merely serve as subordinate consultative units. For the elections of the union executive committee, each union branch first nominated three candidates for a total of 21 candidates. Then the election preparatory committee, dominated by the managerial staff, elected 6 candidates out of the 21. Following this, the trade union members’ representatives (whose existence most workers were unaware of before the strike) elected five union committee members out of the six candidates. The two newly elected committee members with the highest votes then become the vice chairs. At this stage, most newly elected division representatives and the union branch committee members could not vote in the elections because they were not the union members’ representatives. Excluding the majority of the workers from the elections of the executive committee members and the vice chair was highly controversial (if not completely undemocratic), not to mention the fact that the legitimacy of those who had been granted the privileges to vote was in grave dispute.

Despite the claim that the elections held in Autoco were ‘direct elections’ and ‘democratic elections’, we must pay serious attention when assessing the new wave of elections to who had the right to run in the elections, who had the right to nominate candidates, who had the right to vote and who were actually elected. In the case of Autoco, the elections of the division representatives and the union branch committee were quite direct and democratic; however, the direct participation of workers stopped at this level. Only the branch committee and the election preparatory committee, dominated by the managerial staff, had the right to nominate candidates for the union executive committee. Furthermore, only the disputed union members’ representatives had the right to vote in these elections. If the purpose of workplace union elections is to make those who govern the union accountable to their members and to subject them to monitoring to ensure their allegiance to the members, then it should be clear that most of the 1,800 workers at Autoco were deprived of the right to nominate the candidates for the union vice chair and committee members, the right to run in these elections, and the right to vote in these elections. These rights were granted to less than a hundred union members’ representatives, whose legitimacy was in dispute. It is worth noting that according to the Trade Union Law (Article 9), Provisions on the Work of Enterprise Trade Unions (thereafter Provisions on Trade Unions, Article 11) and Trial Measures on the Election of Enterprise Trade Union Chairman (thereafter Measures on Trade Union Chairman, Article 14), the union executive committee and chair can be elected in either the trade union members’ congress or trade union members representatives’ congress; in the
former case, all of the members can vote in the election, whereas in the latter case only a handful of members can vote. The ‘direct elections’ taking place in the PRD seem to have taken the easiest route from the authority’s point of view, but it definitely is the least inclusive approach from the democratic-participatory perspective. When most union members cannot vote directly in the elections of the union executive committee members and chairs, the accountability of the officials to the rank-and-file members may be weakened, and the chances that companies or higher-level trade unions will manipulate the elections may increase.

In addition to the controversy over the lack of democracy in the Autoco elections, there were complaints about the management’s manipulation of the process. For example, one of the key strike leaders obtained the same number of votes as her rival during the election of division representatives, making a second round of voting necessary. Before the second round, a division head (ban zhang) tried to persuade his subordinates not to vote for the strike leader. In the end, she got only eight votes compared with her rival’s more than twenty. Some of her colleagues apologized to her after the election, saying that they did not vote for her because of pressure from the division head (interview with a strike leader, 28 September 2010). The enterprise’s desire to influence the election by excluding the worker activists was evident. Under this type of quasi-democratic and partly manipulated election, who was actually elected in Autoco? In the end, two vice chairs were elected in February 2011 — one of them was a department head and the other was the deputy head. Most of the newly elected executive committee members (with only one exception) were from the managerial or supervisory levels. An election preparatory committee member revealed to us that the then vice president of the GDFTU promised them before the elections that at least 50 per cent of the union committee members should be from the rank and file, but after the elections he said that lower-level supervisory staff were counted as rank-and-file workers.

The term of the union executive committee ran out at the end of 2011, and elections were held to elect the new committee for a new three-year term — 2012–2015. Shortly before this election, the election for the new term of trade union members’ representatives was held. Replacing the old representatives that were unknown to most workers, the new union members’ representatives were elected by the members. For the election of the new union executive committee, as in the previous selection, there were restrictions on who had the right to nominate the candidates and who had the right to vote in the election. This time, the outgoing union committee members, who came largely from the managerial level, had the sole privilege of nominating the candidates after consulting with the union division representatives and the union branch (see Figure 2). Before putting forward their nominations, the outgoing committee had to first seek approval from the Autoco party branch (which together with the Chinese Communist Youth League branch was set up shortly after the strike) and the town-level trade union (Lau 2012). According to the Measures on Trade Union Chairman
(Article 7), the enterprise party branch, together with the next level up of the trade union and the union members’ representatives, are responsible for the nomination and election of the enterprise union chair. After all of these steps were accomplished in November 2011, the union member representatives’ congress was held to elect the new union committee members. Following this, the union chair was elected from among the new committee members. In a nutshell, the majority of the rank-and-file members were denied the chance to elect those who were supposed to govern the trade union on their behalf. The newly elected union members’ representatives were the only people granted voting privileges, but they were only allowed to choose from the preselected options offered by the outgoing committee members who were under the leadership of the party-state and the higher-level trade unions, and the influence of the management.

Who were elected under such highly manipulated circumstances? A union branch chair told us that ‘the higher level trade unions suggested that the position of the enterprise union chair should be taken up by the mid-level management, such as the department head. This will make the work of the union easier and smoother’ (interview with a union branch chair, 26 September 2012). The results were in line with this advice. The newly elected chair was a department head, and was simultaneously the secretary of the party branch in Autoco. In other words, he was someone to whom both the company and the party-state could entrust the trade union. In fact, it is stipulated by the Measures on Trade Union Chairman (Article 20) and Provisions on Trade Unions (Article 51) that an enterprise union chair should be under the leadership of both the enterprise party branch and the
higher-level unions, with the former playing a more important role; in enterprises without any party branch, the union should be under the sole leadership of the higher-level unions.

In brief, the union elections in Autoco were initiated by the large-scale workers’ strikes. The actual elections, however, were shaped by various actors. The higher-level trade unions established the rules for the elections: the vice president of the GDFTU ruled out the possibility of electing a new chair in 2010; cumbersome procedures were designed to deprive most rank-and-file members of the opportunity to elect the union committee members and a union chair; and the Shishan town trade unions (and the party branch) had the final say over the candidates for union executive committee members and the chair. The enterprise manipulated the results of the elections by pressuring workers not to vote for ‘troublemakers’. The party-state tried to maintain control by establishing a party branch and a youth league branch in Autoco shortly after the strike. The party branch was a gatekeeper that ensured that all of the candidates for the union executive committee and chair positions were acceptable to the party. The fact that the newly elected union chair was simultaneously the secretary of the party branch revealed the tight link between the union and the party.

The trade union election was meant to be a means to heighten the enterprise unions’ representational capacity. However, can the current practice of indirect and quasi-democratic elections be a solution to the problems facing the Chinese trade unions? Before the 2010 strike, there was no collective bargaining in the factory. However, after the strike, the company had taken the initiative to bargain wages with the trade union; this had led to wage increases greater than that in the years before the strike. Many workers noted to the authors that their employment conditions had improved in the post-strike period. However, in March 2013, more than 100 Autoco workers went on strike because they were dissatisfied with the enterprise trade union’s performance in the ongoing wage negotiation. In 2011 and 2012, the average wage increase for the Autoco workers was about 30 per cent and 15 per cent, respectively (interview with a worker, 29 April 2013; China Labour Bulletin (CLB) 2013). In the collective wage negotiation in 2013, the trade union proposed a wage increase of 388 yuan for the rank-and-file workers (yixian yuangong), who constituted over 80 per cent of the factory’s total workforce, but the company rejected this proposal and offered to increase their pay only by 10.2 per cent (i.e. 220 yuan). The company at the same time proposed to increase the salaries of the second-ranking staff by 12.4 per cent, that of the third- and fourth-ranking staff by 19.8 per cent, and that of the fifth-ranking staff by 18 per cent. Many rank-and-file workers found the company’s counter-proposal unsatisfactory and voiced their suggestions, but the enterprise union elected through ‘democratic elections’ accepted the company’s offer after a number of negotiations. Many rank-and-file workers criticized the union for its compromising attitude and for failing to represent and defend their interests. One of them noted that ‘the company’s proposal is biased towards the higher-ranking staff. Many union’s executive committee
members are not rank-and-file workers; therefore they do not fight for our interests’ (interview with a worker, 29 April 2013).

Discontented with the newly elected trade union, some workers from the assembling division staged an extra-trade union strike to demand a higher pay rise. Shortly after the strike broke out, the management rushed to the open space inside the factory premises and persuaded the strikers to resume working, but the strikers did not move. Later, the union chair and the union branch committee members came to persuade the strikers to talk to the management in the meeting room. In this meeting, the union chair broke into tears, saying that the union had tried its best to advance workers’ interests and he was surprised to see the workers going on strike. Instead of supporting the workers’ strike, the elected trade union acted as the company’s mediator to halt the strike. Despite this pressure from the union chair, the strikers clearly expressed their dissatisfaction with the 10.2 per cent wage increase of 220 yuan and requested a pay rise of at least 300 yuan. The management responded that it would give them a reply the next day. On the second day, workers from two other divisions joined the assembling workers in their industrial actions; they either stopped working or worked slowly. The strike imposed huge pressure on the management, who quickly restarted the wage negotiation with the union. In the new round of negotiation, the management agreed to raise the wages of the rank-and-file workers by 14.4 per cent (i.e. 310 yuan). This incident showed that if elections are a formality and fail to transform the pro-capital and pro-party-state enterprise unions into a truly representative body of workers, workers’ struggles may continue none the less — and expose the unrepresentative character of the unions.

*The Eleco Case*

In April and May 2012, elections were held in the Japanese-owned Eleco, after workers went on strike in March to demand higher wages, better benefits and the democratic election of trade union officials. The factory employed about 850 workers (Liaowang 2012; Southern Metropolis Daily 2012a). The little-known enterprise union was first established in 2007. The last chair, who was a department head (bu zhang), noted in a newspaper interview that ‘the enterprise trade union was arranged by the higher-level trade unions; it was established for the mere sake of establishing and its officials were not selected through elections’. At the time of the strike, all of the union executive committee members came from the managerial and supervisory level (Southern Metropolis Daily 2012a), and they did not support the strike. During the strike, the workers issued an open letter with seven demands; trade union elections were at the top of these requests. The strike forced the company to loosen its grip on the union, and after the strike the company agreed to organize a union election. Furthermore, the company agreed to give an annual operational fee of 100,000 yuan to the union and that the chief executive officer would have two meetings with the union chair each year (Southern Metropolis Daily 2012b).
The key issues in the Eleco elections were again who had the right to run for office, to nominate candidates and to vote, and who were actually elected (see Figure 3). As in the case of Autoco, a trade union preparatory committee was first set up to decide on the electoral procedures. Little was known about the composition of this preparatory committee; it was not reported by the media nor revealed by our interviewees. The Eleco workers first elected union committee members for the seven branches, altogether 75 in number, who were at the same time elected as the union members’ representatives. This was different from the Autoco case in which the branch union committee members (and the division representatives) were not necessarily the same as the union members’ representatives. Our interviews with workers determined that different departments deployed different election methods at this level. For example, in some departments workers nominated the candidates, whereas in others the managers designated the candidates (interviews with workers, 22 November 2012). According to a newspaper report, 65 out of the 75 (87 per cent) union members’ representatives were rank-and-file workers (Liaowang 2012). The second stage of the elections selected the 11 union executive committee members. The 75 union members’ representatives first elected from among themselves 14 candidates for the union executive committee. The trade union preparatory committee, which had an unclear composition, was given the power to approve these candidates (Economic Observer Daily 2012). Once the candidates were approved, the union members’ representatives elected 11 of the 14 to be union executive committee members. In other words, only the 75 union members’ representatives, out of the 850 workers in Eleco, had the right to nominate candidates and vote in the election of union executive committee members. According to our interviews with workers, among the 11 newly elected officials, only one was a rank-and-file worker; the others were department heads, section managers (ke zhang), team leaders (zu zhang) and so forth. The third stage of the

FIGURE 3
The Union Elections in Eleco in 2012.

© 2014 John Wiley & Sons Ltd/London School of Economics.
process was to elect the union chair and vice chair. The 11 elected executive committee members elected among themselves three candidates for the union chair and vice chair, and then the 75 union members’ representatives voted for their preferred candidate. In this stage, the right of nomination was restricted to an even smaller number of people. After numerous rounds of voting, a new chair, who was the section head of the production department, was elected (Nanfang Daily 2012a).

A number of features of the Eleco elections deserve our critical attention. First, as in the Autoco case, the entire election process was not direct, but rather highly cumbersome. Furthermore, the elections were only quasi-democratic. The higher the level of the positions being filled, the more exclusive was the election process and the fewer the number of workers who had the right to nominate and vote in the election. Moreover, the higher the position within the union structure, the lower the number of the rank-and-file workers who were elected. This indirect election system had a strong filtering mechanism that not only excluded the rank-and-file workers from the top positions, but also excluded them from nominating and voting for candidates for the higher positions. However, this election system allowed most workers to vote at the lowest level of the union elections, giving them a minimal sense of control. This type of indirect election system reflects the reservations that the city-, provincial- and national-level unions have about direct democratic elections; they are afraid that they will lose control over the workplace unions if workers directly elect the union chair because workers may nominate or elect somebody who is deemed ‘untrustworthy’ by the higher-level unions.

The second issue that should draw our attention is the role of the higher-level trade unions in these elections. As in the case of Autoco, their influence was conspicuous in Eleco. The elections were initiated and guided by the SZFTU, and the district- and town-level trade unions (Shenzhen Overseas Chinese News 2012; Southern Metropolis Daily 2012b; Zhongguo Jingying Bao 2012). The electoral procedures were designed by the SZFTU (interview with a labour scholar, 10 October 2012). They ‘gave guidance’ (zhidao) to the last chair on how to carry out the elections and they sent officials to attend the elections (Longgang District Trade Unions 2012). Their involvement was not restricted to procedural issues; they were also involved in matters of real significance. They kept a tight grip over the nomination of candidates, as revealed by the then vice president from the GDFTU in a newspaper interview on the Eleco elections:

no matter what elections method is used, the most critical thing lies on the nomination and confirmation of the candidates; this is the most fundamental procedure . . . Candidates should not be casually proposed by any individuals or organisations; instead they should be proposed by workers on the conditions that they are approved by the higher-level trade unions (Nanfang Daily 2012a).

This demonstrates that the higher-level unions want to be gatekeepers. Only candidates who were deemed trustworthy and qualified in the eyes of the government apparatus were allowed to run in elections. In fact, according
to Measures on Trade Union Chairman (Article 9), the higher-level trade unions and enterprise party branches are required to review the candidates for the enterprise union chair and readjust those candidates who are not qualified. Under the system of democratic centralism, it is stated clearly that the lower-level unions must obey the higher-level ones (Constitution of the Chinese Trade Unions Article 9). The higher-level unions should guide the enterprise union elections (Trade Union Law Article 11; Measures on Trade Union Chairman Article 4), and all of the elected officials and candidates of unions chair should be subject to the approval of higher-level unions and the enterprise party branch (Provisions on Trade Unions Articles 11 and 24; Measures on Trade Union Chairman Article 11). In other words, on the surface, workers or their representatives have been given the right to vote, but in fact they are only allowed to fly within the cage.

The third issue that needs to be considered is the actions of the company. As explained earlier, in some departments the managers selected the candidates who would run in the election of the union members’ representatives; this was certainly an improper managerial manipulation. In addition, it was reported that after the union elections, a number of strike activists were removed from their original job positions. Some workers regarded this as revenge by the company. The Eleco trade union tried to seek help from the SZFTU but did not get a positive response. The SZFTU told the trade union that ‘this is about the development needs of the enterprise and the trade union should not intervene’ (Zhongguo Caifu 2012). It was obvious that although the company had agreed to hold the union elections, it was far from tolerance of strike activists. The suspected revenge on the strike activists and the tacit consent given by the SZFTU have overshadowed the future development of the fledging trade union.

The fourth issue is that the current indirect election system not only deprives the majority of workers of the chance to elect the top governing body of their own organization, it has also defeated its original purpose of making the unions more legitimate and representative. Most of the workers we interviewed participated in the elections of the union members’ representatives, and they had positive comments about those elections and how they were conducted. However, they knew little about the elections of the union committee members and chair, as they were not union members’ representatives and could not cast a vote. Therefore, these elections were a black box to most workers. Some workers remarked that they did not know what the union executive committee members were doing and found them irrelevant to the workers. Unless the intention was to create such a gap between the union and its members, the election system should be made more inclusive and transparent.

Similar to the case of Autoco, the newly elected enterprise trade union in Eleco failed to advance workers’ interests and thus provoked workers to undertake extra-trade union actions to safeguard their own well-being. On 28 February 2013, 106 Eleco union members signed a joint letter requesting the recall of the newly elected chair from office (interview with workers, 7, 8, 10
These Eleco workers were dissatisfied with the chair because he did not support workers who had labour disputes related to their labour contracts. According to the Labour Contract Law, once workers’ have completed two three-year contracts, employers should sign a permanent contract with the workers. However, Eleco did not renew the contract of 22 workers who had finished two contractual terms; instead it offered them a compensation amount to their monthly salary times their total years of service, and asked them to sign a settlement agreement. After signing the agreement, the workers found out that the compensation offered by Eleco was just half of the legal requirement. Workers wrote in their letter to the public that they had sought help from the enterprise union numerous time, but ‘the union did not take any measures, and thus we were deceived by the company, and signed the settlement agreement . . . we asked the union to intervene into the dispute afterwards; it did not offer any help and the chair even kicked us out of the union office’. The company renewed the contracts of another 13 workers and offered them a pay rise of 10 per cent in ‘the letter of intent on renewing the labour contract’. However, the new contract the company later offered these workers did not contain the pay rise. A joint letter signed by 106 workers said that in this case the union chair did not defend workers’ interests, but rather persuaded the 13 workers to accept the revised contract.

Eleco workers’ request to recall the enterprise union chair was not approved by the enterprise trade union committee, which has been given the right by the Trade Union Laws to make decisions concerning the recall request (Chinese Workers 2013). And a labour scholar told us that the SZFTU found the workers’ recall request irrational and unreasonable. Because of the hindrance created by the enterprise- and city-level unions, the recall request was turned down. This incident has two implications for the implementation of democratic trade unionism in China. First, it again illustrates that if ‘direct elections’ are largely a formality and the newly elected unions cannot prioritize workers’ interests over the concerns of the party-state and business interests, and be truly accountable to workers, aggrieved workers are likely to defend their own interests through extra-trade union actions. Second, workers taking action to recall an enterprise trade union chair had not been common in China; Eleco workers’ recall request reflected the growing trade union consciousness of the Chinese workers. However, their assertion of the associational rights and their attempt to make their trade unions accountable to them have met resistance from the quasi-democratic enterprise union and the higher-level unions that have been incorporated into the party-state.

4. Conclusions

There have been pilot enterprise union elections in China since the 1980s, but they have recently undergone some significant changes in terms of their
driving force. Many elections occurring since 2010 have been workers’ strikes-driven, whereas the elections in previous decades were usually top-down-initiated by the party-state and its apparatuses, or TNC-induced. These distinctions are useful for understanding the development of union elections and the impetus for the development of democratic trade unionism in China, but they are not rigid categorizations. These three types of elections are by no means mutually exclusive; rather they reflect general trends and the characteristics of the state–capital–labour relations in particular periods of time. The pilot enterprise union elections during the 1980s and 1990s were mainly top-down projects initiated by the higher-level unions or the party-state. They sought to fix the institutional dilemmas facing the ACFTU in a market economy. Workers at the time did not have the consciousness to exercise control over their collective associations. Without workers’ continuous pressure, the elected trade unions were quickly assimilated into the dominant union cultures or co-opted by the management and the conservatives within the party-state, and the ACFTU had no pressure to widely promote union elections. As a result, the top-down-initiated elections were not sustainable and did not spread to other companies or industries. The emergence of TNC-induced elections in China during the 2000s echoed the rise in Western consumers’ concerns about the labour conditions in China and TNCs’ resulting CSR programmes. This type of election occurred when a TNC exercised its leverage over its supply factories along the global production chain. However, TNCs were usually half-hearted in promoting authentic democratic trade unionism, as it was contrary to their vested interest. The lack of pressure on TNCs’ suppliers and the absence of strong pressure from workers turned union elections into another window dressing strategy of TNCs.

In contrast, workers’ strike is one of the crucial impetus for the current wave of union elections in Guangdong. To alleviate the labour unrest that has increasingly targeted the unions’ lack of representativeness, the party-state and the ACFTU must not only grant economic concessions to workers, they must also loosen their grip on unions and promote ‘direct’ and ‘democratic’ elections at the enterprise level. Workers’ strikes have not only led to elections in the companies where the strikes have occurred, they have also compelled the Shenzhen and Guangdong unions to initiate elections in companies where no strike has been staged.

Trade union elections in China, and union democracy to a broader extent, are by no means only an internal affair of trade unions, as has been suggested by some Western scholars. Instead, the party-state, higher-level unions, management and workers are all shaping the actual implementation of the elections. Using this framework for our analysis, we have five conclusions about the new type of union elections. First, the higher-level unions and the enterprise party branch are the rule setters in the game. Although having all union members vote in the election of union executive committee members and the committee chair is one of the possible election methods stipulated by laws, in almost all cases the higher-level trade unions and enterprise party branch
have chosen electoral procedures that restrict the majority of workers to nominating candidates for and voting in lower-level union elections while granting the privilege to nominate and cast a vote in the higher-level elections (i.e. the trade union committee members, chair and vice chair) to less than a hundred workers. In addition, the nomination of the union chair and executive committee members requires the approval of the higher-level unions and the enterprise party branch. These mechanisms prevent individuals who are popular with workers, but who are considered untrustworthy or unacceptable by the union or enterprise authorities, from standing for elections. Simply put, the higher the position in the enterprise union structures, the less involved workers are in the elections; the more important the positions are, the more the control comes from the higher-level unions and the party branch. The strong filtering mechanisms exclude rank-and-file workers from the higher levels of the union structures. Contrary to the claim that these elections are ‘direct’ and ‘democratic’, the current evidence suggests that they are at most indirect and quasi-democratic elections, if not manipulated.

Our second conclusion is that the party-state not only controls enterprise union elections through the higher-level unions, it has also responded to challenges by building up enterprise party branches. According to the Trade Union Law and the Constitutions of Trade Unions, the enterprise party branch and the trade union level just above the enterprise level should guide and lead the enterprise union, but with the former as the primary source of leadership. In other words, the party-state has loosened its grip on the formation of grass-root trade unions, but has tried to retain control by using other means to guide and monitor the union elections.

Our third conclusion is that management has also tried to influence the elections. In the case of Eleco, the management manipulated the elections by selecting the candidates who could run as union members’ representatives and who, once elected, would be the only people allowed to vote in the elections for the union executive committee members and chair. In the case of Autoco, the management pressured workers to not vote for the strike leaders, to prevent the ‘troublemakers’ from being elected as branch committee members. The involvement of the higher-level unions has resulted in electoral procedures full of filtering effects and the managerial manipulation has made an already biased system even more biased.

Fourth, on the surface, the party-state and the capital are now more open to enterprise union elections, but at the same time they have attempted to circumscribe the elections. Under the indirect and quasi-democratic elections, many of the key positions in the trade unions, including the chair, were filled by managerial and supervisory staff and party members. Only a handful of rank-and-file workers (if any) were able to get through the filtering mechanisms to become bearers of important positions.

Fifth, from the labour perspective, although their wildcat strikes led to union elections in their companies, the workers have no guarantees that their extra-trade union activism will be smoothly transformed into institutional power for the rank-and-file workers. The rules of the game established by the
higher-level unions and the enterprise party branches, and the managerial influence, have frustrated many strike activists. In the case of Autoco, a strike leader was told by the higher-level unions that he was not suitable for the position of union executive committee member or chair because he was not well educated. His communication with outside parties was closely monitored by the government. In the end, he was so discouraged he left the company. Other strike activists were approached by the management shortly after the strike and were subsequently less active in workers’ issues and not as interested in union reform. Some of them later joined the Chinese Communist Youth League branch that was set up after the strike. In the case of Eleco, some strike activists were removed from their original positions, which was seen as revenge by the company. A worker activist who reported this issue on Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter, stopped updating this story and refused all requests for interviews after the SZFTU said the enterprise trade union should not intervene in this incident (Zhongguo Caifu 2012).

Workers’ strikes were the main impetus for the recent wave of enterprise union elections in Guangdong; their extra-trade union workplace bargaining power pressured the party-state, higher-level unions and management to accept union elections. However, workers were pulled back to the original uneven playing field during the implementation of the elections. In this playing field, the party-state, the higher-level unions and management exercise far greater institutional and organizational power than the workers. If workers’ extra-union associational power is not sustained after the strike, the union elections would quickly turned into indirect and quasi-democratic elections by the state–capital alliance. If the Chinese trade unions cannot get rid of the major constraints highlighted by Chen (2003), that is their double institutional identity as both state apparatus and labour organization, and managerial manipulation, then workers’ struggles, such as the Eleco workers’ attempt to recall their pro-company chair and Autoco workers’ strike to demand a wage increase higher than that agreed by the trade union, will continue. This kind of labour power, if strong enough, could reconfigure the power relations between the party-state, trade unions, capital and labour, and may be able to push democratic trade unionism a step forward.

Due to space limitation, this article has paid most attention to the dynamics between the quadripartite actors in the electoral processes, which had not been substantially analysed by the current literature, but are critical for the development of democratic trade unionism in China. In addition, a critical post-strike development in Autoco and Eleco are elaborated to indicate workers’ evaluation of the newly elected trade union, its effectiveness in representing workers’ interests, and the extent to which the indirect and quasi-democratic elections can help pacify the restive workers. This article has opened up knowledge of the strike-driven elections since 2010; two types of further research will deepen our understanding of the development of the trade union elections in China. A cross-time comparative study on the functions, operations and activities of trade unions elected through ‘democratic elections’ will allow us to examine from a broader temporal angle how the
quadripartite actors have shaped post-strike industrial relations. It will also identify the obstacles to the transformation of workers’ workplace bargaining power as expressed in their strikes into their associational power. Moreover, as the state-driven, TNC-induced and strike-driven elections concurrently take place in China, a detailed comparison among the three types of trade union elections will help formulate a comprehensive picture of the overall dynamics of trade union elections in the country.

Final version accepted on 13 September 2014.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Research Grants Council (RGC) of Hong Kong, Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholar Exchange, and the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences of the City University of Hong Kong for their financial support to this research. Also, we express our gratitude to Prof. Simon Clarke, Prof. Chris Smith, Prof. Stephen Frenkel and Dr. Anita Chan for giving us constructive and inspiring comments on the previous versions of this article, which has been presented in various conferences. We must also thank our research team members, including YY, Francine, Pat, Wangting, Aijin and Junchi. Lastly, we would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful advice.

Notes

1. There are some exceptions, such as Hyman (1975), who highlighted both the internal and external constraints facing trade unions with regard to internal democracy, and Anderson (1978), who suggested that the external setting may impact the extent of democracy within trade unions.

2. Although we argue that a new wave of trade union elections in Guangdong is emerging, we are well aware that many company trade union officials are still not democratically elected. In fact, some workers’ attempts to push for elections have been met with resistance from the higher-level trade unions or their employers (see, e.g., Zhongguo Caifu 2012, iSun Affairs 2012).

3. When discussing the strike settlements in China, Chen also proposed that they are usually a quadripartite settlement involving the party-state, trade unions, workers and employers (Chen 2010).

4. Fictitious names for these two cases were used in this article. The two case studies in this article are not conducted for the sake of comparison; instead they serve an exploratory purpose (Rowley 2002) regarding the issue of strikes-driven elections, which has been a new phenomenon in China since 2010. One of the methodological advantages of conducting case studies is that it can account for complicated causal relations, such as complex interactions effects (George and Bennett 2005). To show that our analysis is not specific to an isolated or individual case, we have conducted
eight case studies and analysed two of them (which are from different industries and cities) in this article.

5. They are United Trade Unions in FIEs, United Unions or Union Committees and Community Unions (Taylor and Li 2010).

References

All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) (2010). ‘Further Strengthen the Building of Workplace Trade Unions and Give Them Full Play [jinyibu jiaqiang qiye gonghui jianshe congfen fahui qiye gonghuii zouyong]’. China: ACFTU.


—— (2013). CLB’s comment on the Nanhai Honda strike broke out during collective bargaining. http://www.clb.org.hk/schi/content/clb%E4%B8%93%E5%AE%B6%E7%82%B9%E8%AF%84%E5%8D%97%E6%B5%B7%E6%9C%AC%E7%94%B0%E5%9C%A8%E9%9B%86%E4%BD%93%E8%B0%88%E5%88%A4%E8%BF

© 2014 John Wiley & Sons Ltd/London School of Economics.


