Labor Discontent in China in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract: A prominent specialist on the political economy of China compares the responses of Chinese workers to globalization-induced job cuts and benefit reductions with those of workers in two quite different political contexts—France and Mexico. A hypothesis, based on the "terms of attachment" among states, workers, and their unions, is advanced to account for the quite different responses of labor (in terms of propensity to protest) to similar global economic forces buffeting the three countries beginning in the early 1980s. The analysis of labor discontent and unrest in China is based on information on nearly 200 separate events collected by the author from news sources in Hong Kong, the Western media, and Chinese publications. *Journal of Economic Literature*, Classification Numbers: F02, J51, J52, O15. 1 table, 115 references. Key words: China, economic liberalization, labor unions, terms of attachment, worker protest, globalization, job loss, job benefits, strikes, unemployment, unemployment insurance, labor protest, France, Mexico.

The question of worker activism in the wake of economic liberalization and the demise of socialist economies has attracted a fair amount of attention. A collection of studies exploring the fate and practices of labor after the end of socialism across Eastern Europe (Crowley and Ost, 2001) demonstrates that the members of the working class are uniformly quiescent, if for various reasons, in the different countries investigated by the contributors. Another publication (Chen and Sil, 2006) finds disparity in the actions and outcomes in Russia and China, where (the authors hold) unions achieved greater autonomy from government by the late 1990s in Russia than they had in China, and that Chinese workers had in consequence moved to operating through unofficial channels to express their discontent.

A third work brings together analyses of states that industrialized late and of those where socialism is over to conclude that "distinctive national and local institutions persist in the course of economic reform" (Candland and Sil, 2001, pp. 4, 16). In many of them—whether by means of bureaucratic authoritarianism (as in Latin America) or capitalist developmentalism (in East Asia)—the state remained central because of its critical role in industrialization. In some, however (especially in Central and Eastern Europe), the fall of communist regimes meant a precipitous confrontation with the global economy, eclipsing both the state and the unions (Sil and Candland, 2001, p. 287; Kopstein, 2001, pp. 233, 258).

All the writings noted above address the question of whether and how policies detrimental to workers' interests (e.g., massive layoffs and benefit reductions or withdrawals that accompany economic liberalization and entry into the world market) affect unions and their ability to mobilize in opposition to such policies and measures. However, absent from these

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studies is a comparison of worker politics under vastly disparate regime types, where the one common factor is a surge of job losses as the governments responded to rules imposed by supra-national economic organizations (SEOs).

This paper extends the argument in Chen and Sil (2006), by comparing China with France and Mexico to argue that the position of unions in relation to their state and workers determines labor's response to benefit reductions and job losses. In brief, despite the democratic form of government in France, and the ongoing democratization of the regime in Mexico, it was in yet-authoritarian (if ever more capitalist) China that demonstrations and protests rose with increasing globalization, in comparison with what happened under governments where protests were much more common in the past. I thus target the combination of new influences coming from global involvement, on the one hand, and unions' political placement between state and workers, on the other, to draw more general inferences about the propensity for enhanced public dissent among workers under the impact of global forces.

China and the two other countries under consideration had long histories of relative absence from the world economy, paired with protectionist policies toward their working classes. Within a brief few years, however—from 1980 to 1983—as each of these states confronted some kind of globally related economic crisis, their leaders soon geared up for membership in a supranational organization, an accession which, for each, would mean the loss of jobs for millions. France signed onto the Maastricht Treaty, which made a European Union out of the Economic Community in 1992; Mexico joined the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) in 1994; and China finally was admitted into the World Trade Organization WTO) in 2001.

In each case, the rules of entry into these bodies (which, for Mexico and China, became operative years before their respective accessions, as each strove to become eligible in the eyes of the organizations' members) spelled major job losses. The relevant rules for each called for such policies as decreased tariff rates, national treatment for investors, elimination of non-tariff barriers (such as licensing and the reduction of import quotas, among other demands), and, in the case of France, domestic austerity and budgetary stringency, each of which undermined jobs at home.[2]

In China, untold tens of millions of workers lost their jobs as enterprises became unprofitable and the government called for efficiency and competitiveness in the interest of restructuring the entire economy to meet international norms (Solinger, 2001). In France, numerous firm bankruptcies were accompanied by huge job losses: by 1997, the total losses over the years since 1970 had amounted to a stunning 41.6 percent of the original labor force (Scharpf, 2000, p. 108). And in Mexico, in the course of the structural adjustments implemented by politicians, millions of workers were severed from their positions. By the end of 1994, the unemployed together with those at work in the underground economy already amounted to as much as 26 percent of the workforce without steady employment (Meyer, 1998, p. 144), while the numbers of jobs in manufacturing declined continuously for 70 months between 1990 and 1996 (Heath, 1998, p. 54)[3] in a labor force of some 35 million.

[2]France's initial choice to submit to European Community economic guidelines came in 1983, just after China began courting the GATT in 1980 and just before Mexico joined the GATT, in 1986.

[3]Between one and two million jobs overall (out of a labor force of 35 million) are believed to have disappeared in the Mexican economy between 1990 and 2000, over a million in agriculture alone (de Oliveira and Garcia, 1997, p. 212). Camp (1996, p. 219) has estimated that the total job loss figure may have been as high as one million (see also Audley et al., 2004, p. 18).

The normal assumption would be that once so many workers were terminated (and/or sustained sudden cutbacks in benefits), which happened after 1983 in France and Mexico and during and after the 1990s in China, there would be a strong response from the losers. The question is whether changes in levels of protest in the face of abrupt deprivation of employment and welfare took place in each state in comparison with the past.

One might hypothesize, other things being equal, that several comparable historical features that had long fed workers' loyalty to and high expectations of their rulers, when joined to a similar sense of relative deprivation in their post-1980 plights, should have called forth increases of protest against acts of state disavowal. What happened instead was that Mexican workers protested far less than they had in the past; French worker demonstrations also dropped off notably. It was only in China that public marches, rallies, and struggles of all kinds rose exponentially in number after 1990. What can account for this puzzle? I propose that the "terms of attachment" that linked states, workers, and their unions is the primary explanatory factor. These terms worked to "mediate" the impact of globalization, which thus had only a secondary effect, to borrow a concept from Cortell (2006).

Thus, internationally linked market forces, especially as communicated by membership in extra-territorial commercial unions, ironically produced the greatest disruption in the very one of these three labor environments where unions were weakest, namely in China. In short, different terms of attachment in each country shaped the way in which similar global economic forces were processed internally: disparate terms molded the way in which global forces affected workers' protests (and their ability to protest) in the three states after the early 1980s. The dependent variable, then, is the frequency of protest after the early 1980s, as compared with the level of activism in a given country displayed by its workers in the past.

The basic contrast that emerges highlights the combined impact on worker activism of (a) similar global forces in the three countries after the early 1980s, and (b) older, dissimilar patterns of state–worker–union interactions. The comparison is one between: (1) a heightening of the original impotence of Chinese unions under the onslaught of marketization and privatization, which both permitted and compelled workers to act autonomously; (2) a decline of unions' appeal for workers, and so a drop in their memberships, and thus of their earlier bargaining power,[4] resulting in a reduction in French workers' protests; and (3) ongoing, fundamentally unaltered repressiveness by union bosses loyal to the PRI as Mexico liberalized, and its leaders sought to satisfy foreign investors, producing a sizable setback for protest.

Admittedly, the protests in the three states had differing objectives: in China angry workers mainly addressed job loss and wage and pension shortfalls, whereas in Mexico and France the demonstrators were employed strikers agitating against wage levels, working conditions, and threats of benefit cuts. Nonetheless, I consider them together, for what interests me is variation over time in the level of activism in response to employment setbacks in each state.

CRUDE MEASUREMENTS

To some extent these differences can be measured. Table 1 sets the stage for the discussion by detailing urban employment, registered and estimated actual unemployment, and the number of union members in China.[5] But complete and accurate statistics on protest numbers and also on trends are impossible to accumulate, for a number of reasons. Even in France and

[4]Such as it was, in the face of French *rigeur.*

[5]The figures presented in the table should be viewed as approximations. An evaluation of the veracity of China's statistics is beyond the scope of this paper (see Cai, 2004 and Giles et al., 2005).

Table 1. Urban Labor Force and Union Membership in China, 1978–2005 (thous.)[a]

Year	Urban employment	Unemployment		*N* of union members
		Official (registered)	Rate, percent[b]	
1978	95,140	5,300	5.4	n.a.
1980	105,250	5,415	4.9	61,165
1985	128,080	2,385	1.8	85,258
1990	170,410	3,832	2.5	101.356
1995	190,400	5,196	2.9	103,996
2000	231,510	5,950	3.1	103,625
2002	247,800	7,700	4.0	133,978
2005[c]	273,310	7,197	n.a.	150,294

[a]Data exclude “rural migrant labor.”
[b]The estimated true rate, including unemployment not registered, varies by author. Giles et al. (2005) estimated that it was 11 percent for China as a whole in 2002; in the five cities surveyed by these authors, the rate was 14.1 percent in 2002. If rural migrant labor were to be included, the rate would have been 7.3 percent (see also Cai, 2004).
[c]Cf. France, where all employment in 2005 was 24,919,400, unemployment was 2,717,000, and the official unemployment rate was 10.1 percent, as well as Mexico, where the corresponding numbers were 40,791,800 and 1,482,500, and the rate 3.6 percent (ILO, 2007). Data for France and Mexico are based on labor force survey statistics.
Sources: Compiled by the author from Zhongguo tongjiju, 2003, pp. 7, 128; Zhongjua renmin, 2003, p. 823; National Bureau of Statistics, 2006; and ILO, 2007.

Mexico, annual data exist solely for strikes and lockouts, omitting protests over job loss. Moreover, in Mexico, while strikes themselves declined greatly, worker petitions (which were requests to demonstrate, but whose submission required prior state approval) may have been numerous, but nearly all were later withdrawn. In China, the principal difficulty is that the regime works hard to keep bad news out of the media. It does, nonetheless, release figures on “social disturbances,” a broad and ambiguous category. There are no known comprehensive compilations available for China either of strikes or of demonstrations over job loss.[6]

However, the International Labour Office publishes a database on all strikes[7] in a number of countries that was compiled by its Bureau of Statistics from the early 1970s through the year 2000.[8] These numbers reveal trends in militancy over these years for France and Mexico. For instance, the number of strikes and lockouts in France from 1980 to 2001 reached a peak in 1982, the year before President Mitterrand moved to align his economy with that of the European Community. The numbers dropped to nearly half of that in many of the following years up until 1999.[9]

Moreover, although the annual number of strikes and lockouts ranged from 3,000 to 4,400 in the 1970s in France, the range extended from a low of just 1,391 to a high of only

[6]Roughly 87,000 “public order disturbances” reportedly occurred in 2005, but this category includes any event in which people gathered in a disorderly fashion. Thus it is by no means a clear indication of worker protests (see McGregor, 2006, citing an official statistic released on January 19, 2006 on the website of China’s Ministry of Public Security).

[7]This category, of course, differs from demonstrations by workers aggrieved because of layoffs.

[8]The website, known as LABORSTA, can be accessed at http://laborsta.ilo.org (ILO, 2007).

[9]The one exception was 1995, the year of a major societal-wide movement, which still fell far below the 1982 level.

2,500 from 1984 to 1999. Even more striking, while the numbers of workers involved reached a high of 4,348,000 in 1976, those figures had fallen by about three quarters by the late 1990s, with the sole exception again for the year 1995.[10]

In Mexico, the contrasts between pre- and post-1982 periods are even sharper. Whereas in the first three years of the 1980s the numbers of strikes and lockouts exceeded 1,000, reaching as many as 1,925 in 1982, immediately thereafter—just when the force of the country's debt crisis was felt most acutely–the numbers abruptly plummeted to around a mere 100 per annum. By 1995, the count had descended into the single digits. And while the number of days not worked because of strikes stood above 1.36 million in 1982, the statistics registered a decline of 90 percent by the mid-1990s.

In China, except for the years of major political upheaval (e.g., the 1957 Hundred Flowers campaign and the 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution), strikes and other forms of worker demonstration were conspicuously absent (Perry, 1995). Yet protest in China became substantial, exhibiting a steady increase in and after the late 1990s. The state Ministry of Public Security found that the numbers of "mass incidents . . . began . . . [to] rise like a violent wind" (Ministry, 2001, p. 18) from 1997, the year of the Fifteenth Party Congress which pressed for factory firings.[11] Tanner (2004, p. 137) attests to "incidents numbering in the tens of thousands each year"; he also cites a local Chinese report showing that in one province over 80 percent of the mass demonstrations resulted from dissatisfaction with adjustments during its program of economic reform that radically undercut labor's position (Tanner, 2002, p. 10). Another study (Chen, 2000, p. 41) characterized labor protests as having increased "by quantum leaps" in the 1990s. By the end of the decade, 100,000 labor protests had taken place (although, certainly, far from all were waged by the dismissed), according to the Center for Human Rights and Democracy, based in Hong Kong (Jiang, 2001, p. 72).

How can one account for mounting outbursts in China, where nearly none had occurred in prior years, versus increasing quiescence in France and Mexico in the wake of similar losses? After reviewing several alternative hypotheses, I focus upon the differential nature of the "terms of attachment" in the three countries connecting states, unions, and workers, as they all confronted challenging times.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

In settling on this factor, I first considered alternative explanatory variables. I began with the fact that the workers in question in the three countries were subsisting after the early 1980s in somewhat similar situations. Once-privileged workers in all of them experienced sudden setbacks on two levels: all saw their material situations worsen rapidly and unexpectedly, as their governments yielded first to global forces and, later, to SEO rules—which, in practice, amounted to a proxy for these forces. Although I focus on the accession of these states to different supranational organizations after 1980, each of which varied somewhat in its composition, goals, and partner members, the relevant regulations of all SEO bodies mandated behavior that was substantially similar in its impact on workers and their jobs.

In addition to the material setbacks, given that at least the elite among the workers had long entertained high expectations of, and a sense of dependency upon, the relevant states,

[10]Furthermore, the number of days not worked, which was as high as almost 4.4 million in 1980, dropped into the hundreds of thousands by 1985 and remained there until 2001 (with the exception of 1988).

[11]For Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin's report to the Congress, see *Summary of World Broadcasts* ([*SWB*], FE/3023, September 13, 1997, S1/1–S1/10).

their feelings of discontent and anger were likely mixed with a sense of betrayal. So both because of similar linkages experienced by laborers with the state in the past (a distinct tendency to protect formal, state-affiliated labor in them all), and also because of comparable contemporary blows after 1980, originating in their states' analogous interactions with external organizations, one could expect a certain similarity in laborers' responses to parallel (if not identical) treatment and troubles at the hands of their once-generous governments.

I noted above that, were all else equal, one would expect more resistance when things got seriously worse for workers. But in fact, other things were *not* equal, although the variation was not in the expected direction. To start with, a set of seemingly critical contextual differences determined the objective *economic circumstances* facing aggrieved workers in the three countries; thus it is possible to hypothesize a variable likelihood of protest on *material grounds*—that is, with regard to the degree of sheer need. Fundamental *political differences* also existed in terms of regime type among the three countries, and thus in the *political opportunities and accompanying political calculations* of the workers. These differences could have affected the probability on *political grounds* that aggrieved workers in one state would be more apt to express opposition publicly than such workers in another.

The three following disparate, objective, *material circumstances* could potentially account for differences in workers' propensity to protest: (1) the possibility of obtaining welfare *relief* (specifically, unemployment insurance) to compensate for job losses; (2) the presence of foreign-invested, private-sector, or informal labor markets, such that dismissed workers could find new job opportunities if they had lost state-sector jobs; and (3) the availability of opportunities to migrate to places where jobs were more plentiful. The supposition would be that where welfare relief, alternative jobs, or chances to migrate were available, protest would be reduced, as all of these options would provide newly deprived laborers an "exit" from their plight (Hirschman, 1970).

As for the *political environment* they confronted, one might hypothesize that regime type (along with ongoing regime change, in Mexico) would be a critical factor. Here the option of "voice" would be relevant. But the factor of regime type can cut both ways. On one hand, workers should have more space and scope for opposition in democratic contexts than in authoritarian or post-totalitarian ones, where repression could serve as a serious obstacle to public resistance. According to this argument, one could predict that protests would be most numerous in democratic France, where the political climate was most permissive, next most numerous in still democratizing Mexico, and least of all in authoritarian China. On the other hand, in democracies, although more openness and opportunity exist for demonstrating, other, legitimate avenues for displaying discontent are present. These include elections and legal redress, both of which might reduce the level of street-side disturbances. Thus, it may be difficult to make firm predictions about the level of protest on the basis of regime type alone.

On the *economic level*, only in France of the three countries could workers turn to an extant unemployment insurance system for sustenance. And yet social expenditures themselves, like jobs, were also in decline in these years, and indeed constituted a prime motivation for demonstrators. Already in the austerity budget of autumn 1982 severe cuts had been made.[12] And as the 1980s unfolded, the number of informal sector jobs grew steadily, but at the expense of full-time, permanent, jobs with benefits.[13]

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[12]In 1987, Prime Minister Chirac put through legislation that allowed for the reduction of once legally enforced social benefits for workers (Kesselman, 1984a, p. 318; 1996, p. 154).

[13]The number of part-time and temporary jobs increased by 30 percent during the period 1988–1993, while stable, permanent jobs declined by 15 percent (Kesselman, 1989, p. 172; 1996, pp. 147–148, 153, 154).

Most of the strikes that did take place in France were aimed precisely at preventing layoffs or at blocking reductions in benefits (Kesselman, 1996, p. 150). This would suggest that a loss of employment (and the attached benefits) was of critical importance to many workers. And having unemployment insurance to fall back on would not have been a major deterrent to dissatisfaction; even before the cutbacks, the benefits decreased over time and generally expired after only two and a half years.[14] Not surprisingly then, when demonstrations did break out, calls for job creation were prominent (Sage, 2005; Smith, 2005; Sciolino, 2006).

In regard to migration, the main issue among the jobless was not whether they could leave the country, but about the marked discrimination that existed in France against hiring aliens (or even their first-generation descendants). This grievance was particularly salient in areas where unemployment was most pronounced: in immigrant neighborhoods in late 2005 it rose as high as 30 percent or more, compared to around 10 percent in the rest of France (Smith, 2005).

In Mexico, while formal unemployment insurance was not part of the political economy, public-sector workers had been the beneficiaries of all manner of subsidies and privileges (e.g., for housing, health care, and daily-use goods) before 1982. But with the onset of the country's debt crisis, the priority the government placed on social spending in education, health, and general social welfare decreased sharply, from nearly 15 percent of the federal budget in 1982 to only 9.2 percent five years later (Middlebrook, 1989a, p. 293). Thus, Mexico's relatively low rate of worker rebelliousness could not be attributed to labor's ability to rely on social insurance as an alternative.

Informal labor markets were certainly present in Mexico. As early as the late 1980s—a time when the unemployment rate was estimated to be close to 18 percent and the state was still the largest single employer—perhaps as many as a third of the working-age population was scraping out a living in "marginally productive activities" (Middlebrook, 1989a, p. 292; 1989b, p. 198). And by the end of the 1990s up to half of the economically active population relied upon work in the informal sector. But these opportunities would have been of little consolation to the once-well-tended worker charges of the state (Dion, 2002, pp. 22, 28; Levy and Bruhn, 2006, p. 75). Migration out of the country, of course, was an option for those without work in Mexico. But this situation did not change after 1982, and thus could not explain the drop in the number of protests after that date. Therefore, answers based on purely economic grounds could not explain why protest lessened in France and Mexico in the 1980s and 1990s.

In China, unemployment insurance was initiated only in the mid-1980s, and did not become meaningfully operational until the late 1990s. Accordingly, it was not an option for the overwhelming majority of workers losing their jobs during the mid- and late 1990s (Solinger, 2005). Even then, it served a very narrow segment of those displaced from the workplace. And while a special allowance was designed for laid-off workers (the *jiben shenghuofei* [basic living allowance]) and implemented widely in 1998 and a few years thereafter, its application was uneven. So most workers in distress could not count on an exit along that route. On the other hand, the informal sector was rapidly expanding and existed as an alternative for workers who had been laid off.[15] But this occurrence would not differentiate China from France and Mexico.

[14]As a leader of French unemployed workers remarked in 1997, "We should not forget that 80 percent of all the unemployed in France get less than $500 per month in benefits" (Whitney, 1998).

[15]The contribution of private companies to GDP climbed steadily in the 1990s, and by 2007 accounted for more than half of gross domestic product (Fan, 2007).

Departing the scene of job loss was an option rarely chosen, for a former state worker was quite likely to be allowed to retain his or her housing even after forfeiting employment. Accordingly, leaving one's hometown in search of another position elsewhere was a choice few were inclined to make. Therefore, except for the possibility of moving to the informal sector, the potential for solving problems of sudden destitution in China through "exit" was not very great, and this might have disposed the unemployed to protest.[16]

Politically, the existence of democratic and democratizing regimes in the 1980s and 1990s in France and Mexico, respectively, also appears to have had little to do with their workers' decreased inclination to demonstrate after the early 1980s. In democratic France, there was little fear associated with fomenting disorder, and yet such disorder declined relative to the pre-1982 period. And French with grievances certainly had the option of voicing their displeasure at the ballot box.[17] But the ability to vote does not appear to have substituted for what was sometimes even simultaneous protest.[18] Besides, an influential, leftist newspaper, *The Liberation*, judged the top political issue dating back to the early 1980s to be unemployment.[19] This assessment indicates that despite the existence of unemployment insurance and private-sector employment, the French care heartily about jobs.

It is true that the new left-oriented Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) in Mexico nearly triumphed over the PRI in the 1988 presidential election, when a program of austerity was enervating the economy and constricting employment opportunities in the late 1980s. But this did not mean that the votes of the newly unemployed found their suffrage a solution to their woes; the PRI managed to rig the returns to that contest, so that its candidate emerged as the victor.

When the PRI finally did lose the presidency in 2000, in what was then Mexico's most fair and open election to date, it was not to a candidate of the left. Within a year, disgruntled farmers who had had no part in the presidential victory of the National Action Party (PAN)'s Vicente Fox marched on the capital in anger against the man who had just been elected (Thompson, 2001). So Mexican inclinations to express outrage were not quieted by the opportunity to cast ballots. In the next election, held in July 2006, voters' hunger for employment apparently overrode all other concerns, despite plenty of jobs outside the state sector and even while people were still departing in large numbers for the United States.[20]

In China, there was no opportunity for an aggrieved worker to express individual preferences on such matters as unemployment through the ballot, because only the most local units of urban society held elections, and the deliberations of these jurisdictions had no bearing on

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[16]But Chinese workers' lack of welfare insurance resembled what Mexican workers had to contend with, while their disinclination to move away was similar to the situation in France.

[17]One example would be the Socialist Party victory in the 1997 general elections after the right had failed to curb job losses (see Andrews, 1997). And when Socialist Premier Jospin failed to bring down unemployment within his first six months in office, protests ensued (Whitney, 1998). Another case would be the French vote against the European Union Constitution in May 2005, widely interpreted as a protest against economic conditions in France, especially the persistent high unemployment, in tandem with the threat of cuts in social benefits that the Union represented to many French people.

[18]In March, 2004, for example, teachers, hospital workers, scientists, and firefighters went to the streets to protest changes aimed at reducing retirement benefits and calling for harder work, even as the unpopularity of Chirac's domestic economic program led to losses for his party in regional elections (see Smith, 2004).

[19]According to an editorial in that paper in the spring of 2005, "For the past 25 years unemployment has been the French public's foremost concern and their prime voting motivation" (quoted in Sciolino, 2005).

[20]In the the run-up to the presidential election, "jobs, jobs, and more jobs" was the chief platform of all three contenders (Enriquez, 2006).

macro policymaking about the national structure of employment. And as workers in an authoritarian society, it would seem that Chinese labor would be subject to repression for daring to demonstrate. And indeed this was sometimes the case. As layoffs mounted after the early 1990s, the police did become involved in the political management and oversight of demonstrations by terminated employees—sometimes simply for purposes of intimidation, other times to disperse marchers, and at yet other times injuring the demonstrators and detaining their leaders (often for lengthy prison stints) in the process.[21] This repression, however, while certainly giving many potential protesters reason for pause, did not by any means bring street-based belligerence to a standstill.

So while some aspects of the alternative explanations might yield insights for what happened in China, most do not. Neither economic circumstances nor political possibilities and opportunities explain why recently retrenched French and Mexican workers—or those in danger of losing some or all of their benefits—would have been less inclined to protest after 1982 than before. Nor can these factors lead us to an understanding of why Chinese laborers were more unruly than those in the other two countries at a similar time and under somewhat similar circumstances. Having set aside these two forms of alternative explanation, I proceed to examine the place of unions with respect to the terms of attachment binding unions to workers and their states, and the way these terms affected the response to global market pressures.

CHINA

The State and Its Workers

China's workers became far more demonstrative as the years of economic reform, internationalization, and marketization progressed, especially when compared to the relative state of labor quiescence for most of the preceding decades. That job loss in China accompanying the opening to the market led to protests is at first glance surprising. After all, the state's steps toward liberalization in the 1980s and thereafter were almost entirely limited to the economic realm, with only slight alterations to the political one. Top leaders repeatedly affirmed their determination to hold the underlying form of the regime constant, and even went so far as to erase the right to strike from the newly revised state constitution that appeared with the birth of marketization in 1982. But critically, as new grants of autonomy and clout were extended to factory management in the early 1980s, the capacities of unions to supervise labor diminished (Gallagher, 2005).

After ca. 1995, workers in one place or another who had lost their jobs or welfare benefits were out on the streets almost daily. Although the government was determined to keep news of protests (and indeed of disturbances of any kind) out of the media, or to downplay their size and disruptiveness if they were reported, over the period 1994–2004 I was able to collect information on nearly 200 separate events, some from news sources in Hong Kong,

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[21]See *South China Morning Post* (March 2, 1994, pp. 1, 8), which reports that two armed police platoons were deployed in an effort to defuse a 4,000-person-strong strike, following the Ministry of Public Security's creation of a patrol police force in December 1993. Other examples include *Hong Kong Standard* (September 27, 1994, p. 4), Murphy (2002), Weaver (2002), and *Summary of World Broadcasts*, FE/3885 (July 6, 2000, p. G/9). Exercises were held in autumn 2003 in a number of cities directed at preventing outbreaks of urban violence at the hands of aroused workers (see Lam, 2003).

some from the Western media, and a few from Chinese publications.[22] Descriptive data on these cases, along with a number of secondary sources,[23] inform my analysis of China.

These secondary materials show that in this authoritarian state, workers were generally slow to mount demonstrations and reactive and pacific in their style. A foreign reporter (Pan, 2002, p. A01) characterized the workers as "careful to avoid any activity that might be seen as illegal or presenting a political challenge to the government." As another observer aptly noted, aggrieved workers demonstrate only "after the failure of all other mediation possibilities" (Kernen, 2002, p. 15).

A typical incident would begin with petitions to the management of the former employees' firm. If no reply was forthcoming, or when negotiations were deadlocked, frustrated workers next moved up the administrative hierarchy to their municipal leaders in search of redress, usually to report the malfeasance or poor faith of their enterprise directors. If they found no satisfaction at the municipal level, supplicants might proceed to petition even higher levels, beginning with the provincial. Some, in desperation, would travel to Beijing, as a last conciliatory resort. Another peaceable ploy was to work through the nascent legal system, beginning with arbitration and proceeding to the courts.[24] However, both petitions and calls to the courts proved roundly disappointing to those who experimented with them (Gallagher, 2006).

Moves toward sit-ins—often before urban administration compounds, sometimes at factory gates—and rallies and marches in which participants sported posters and shouted slogans, or to blocking traffic signaled more advanced forms of protest. As irritations and resentments persisted and escalated, and as hopelessness with appeals through official channels sank in, the numbers of participants would rise. In extreme and relatively rare cases, workers would throw themselves onto railway tracks,[25] destroy machines, loot goods, detain or attack cadres, or burn police cars. The episodes were generally brief, sporadic, spontaneous, and limited to one factory at a time, for cross-unit mobilization was notoriously treacherous (Lee, 2007). All in all, as of the present writing (2007), this wealth of incidents remains far from constituting a labor movement (e.g., see Chen, 2000; Kernen, 2002; Rocca, 2002; Blecher, 2004).

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[22]These sources include two internal Chinese publications, *Neibu canyue* (*Internal Consultations*) and *Lingdao canyue* (*Leadership Consultations*); private letters from Chinese labor activists; one Chinese labor journal (*Zhongguo laodong* (*Chinese Worker*]); official Chinese news sources (Xinhua [now China News], *China Daily*, Zhongguo xinwenshe [Chinese News Agency]; a range of publications from Hong Kong, including the *South China Morning Post*, *Hong Kong Standard, Wen Wei Po* (*Cultural Paper*), *Ming Pao* (*Bright Paper*), *Lien Ho Po* (*United Paper*), *Tangtai* (*Contemporary Times*), *Zheng Ming* (*Contend*), *Eastern Express* (now defunct), *Ping Guo Jih Pao* (*Apple Daily*), *Hsin Pao* (*Information Paper*), *Sing Tao Jih Pao* (*Singdao Daily*); *Shijie ribao* (*World Daily*), the Hong Kong–based Zhongguo tongxunshe (Chinese News Report Agency), and RTHK (Radio Television Hong Kong); the Central News Agency from Taipei; NHK TV from Japan; Radio Free Asia; the *Far East Economic Review*; news releases from human rights and labor groups, such as the Hong Kong Information Center for Human rights and Democracy, *China Focus* (formerly published by exiles from the Chinese democracy movement at Princeton University [now defunct]), *China Rights Forum* (the journal of the organization Human Rights in China), China Labor Watch and the *China Labour Bulletin*; the online publication *China News Digest* (now defunct); and the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Financial Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal* as well as news agencies Agence France Press, Reuters, Associated Press, and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

[23]These include Lee (1998, 1999a, 2000, 2002a, 2002b), Rocca (1999, 2002, 2004), Chen (2000, 2003), Kernen and Rocca (2000), Blecher (2002, 2004), Cai (2002), Hurst and O'Brien (2002), Kernen (2002), and Kernen and Rocca (2002).

[24]As increasingly more workers became aware of their rights, use of arbitration and court proceedings grew more common.

[25]Or in at least one case, even onto an airport runway (Rosenthal, 2003).

Not just the process, but also the content of workers' pleas and complaints followed standardized patterns. Across the nation, the roots and the refrains of tribulation were the same: old unpaid wages and recent defaults on pension payouts, sudden termination of medical care reimbursement, failure to deliver promised living allowances or unemployment insurance, insufficient severance packages. Simple, desperate appeals for food, work (whether new jobs or reinstatement in the old ones), and basic sustenance formed the core of their recitals. These straightforward cries for bare subsistence intensified when workers believed they had uncovered evidence of embezzlement by management and wrongful bankruptcies, plant closures, mergers, and takeovers. When these outrages occurred, participants demanded information and an opportunity for input. Indeed, charges of corruption were nearly omnipresent behind the tales of ex-employee hunger and deprivation, as the processes of economic liberalization and privatization provided many entrees for shady business dealings (Sun, 2004).[26]

On the part of the state, the behavior of the authorities in the cities mirrored the goals of the central Party and state leaders in Beijing, but with some variation that was rooted in the differential financial resources of the various localities (Hurst, 2003). The municipality, as the site of enforcement, was the location where choices had to be made concerning whether to soft-pedal official countermeasures when protests broke out—in the hope of not further inflaming impassioned protesters—or to resort to brute force to quell disturbances. Underlying this choice was a major incentive for urban officials to mollify protesters: part of the evaluation of a given local official's performance hinged upon whether that person was able to preserve tranquility within his jurisdiction (Lee, 2000, p. 218; Whiting, 2001, pp. 115–116, 234).[27]

Urban authorities at the scene of disturbances in general feared provoking larger conflagrations, and thus usually attempted, at least initially, to calm the protestors. In some cases, officials sent propagandists to meet with demonstrators in the hope of reversing their mindsets.[28] Municipal elites whose localities had sufficient resources would offer payoffs or extend promises (pledges that might never be made good), or backpedal temporarily in the implementation of some reform measure that was especially disadvantageous to labor. Jurisdictions short on funds could appeal to the central treasury for emergency assistance, and, sensing the danger of not complying, central leaders often extended at least a portion of the funds requested. As a rule of thumb, both central leaders and their local deputies tended to tread lightly where the protest was small in scale, confined to one work unit, apolitical in its appeal, nonviolent, and seemingly spontaneous.[29]

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[26]In one case, workers suspected they were victims of a "fake bankruptcy," when (as is often the case in recent years in China) their managers concealed their enterprise's assets, declared bankruptcy, and then bought the firm at a cut-rate price, using embezzled funds (Pan, 2002). In another instance, over a thousand workers threw themselves on the trunkline Beijing-Shanghai railroad, suspending operations on the line for up to eight hours because of a rumor that their old textile plant in the interior, burdened by heavy debts, obsolete equipment, and excessive personnel (as well as corrupt leadership) was planning to announce a reorganization and list its shares on the stock market, after which it would cut its work force in half and not pay workers what they were owed (information from the Hong Kong Information Center for Human Rights and Democracy, November 29, 2000, in *Summary of World Broadcasts*, FE/4012, December 1, 2000, p. G/2).

[27]"Report cards of local government cadres [had a criterion] registering the number of 'spontaneous incidents' occurring in their areas of jurisdiction" (Whiting, 2001, p. 234). This point is also made in Cai (2005).

[28]Examples of these approaches can be found in Lu (1994), *Ming Pao* (December 1, 1996, p. 6; April 4, 1998), Liu (1997), Forney (1997), Smith (1999), *Summary of World Broadcasts* FE/4012 (December 1, 2000, p. G/3, from *Anhui ribao*, November 28, 2000, p. 2), and Liaoyang (2002).

[29]See Walder (2004, p. 206) on the elite's inclination since 1989 to scale back repression in the interest of not alienating middle-class supporters, who would likely be offended by seeing the regime again resort to excessive force to quell protest.

As a consequence, both the authorities (whether at the central or local level) and the leaders of the demonstrations became locked into a tacit contract: although protest continued, as a general rule and most of the time neither side was prepared to go beyond the limits of what the other would tolerate (see Solinger, 2000). Thus previous popular presumptions about leaders' proper beneficence toward the state workforce, combined with the politicians' horror of societal disarray, on the one hand, and worker expectations, on the other, often seemed to entwine the two within a dyad that resembled a static and repetitious tango (e.g., see Solinger, 2000; Shue, 2004).

And yet a perfect stalemate was not the outcome. Economic liberalization and the role played by unions modulated the reciprocally wary relationship between state and worker, invigorating Chinese labor protest and increasing its extent.

The Unions

The most significant variable affecting the nature of Chinese labor protest in the 1990s and thereafter was the weakness and the circumspection under which the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) labored.[30] These traits were a function of the Federation's emergence after the 1949 Communist revolution as the Party's sole handmaiden, serving both as the workers' overseer and their putative delegate (Chen, 2003). Union membership in China remained exceptionally high into the 1990s, encompassing perhaps more than 90 percent of the state sector workforce as late as 1992, according to the State Statistical Bureau (White et al., 1996, p. 43). But that figure simply reflected the fact that union membership in a state-run firm was compulsory and automatic; it had nothing to do with the relationship between the workers' official union and their propensity to take to the streets.

After the Communist takeover of China in 1949, labor unions were caught in a persisting predicament, trapped between fulfilling their duties to the Party and honoring obligations to their members. They were at once prevented by the Party from fully championing the workers, but at the same time not entrusted with repressing them. Thus the mission of the unions during times of worker unrest was little more than to promote and supervise conciliation among the feuding parties, and to defuse tensions (Chen, 2003, p. 1019). As Chinese labor specialist Chang Kai has observed (2005, p. 34):

> . . . .[B]ecause the law does not authorize them to organize strikes, trade unions are confronted with a dilemma . . . when workers apply for strikes. If they stand on the opposite side of workers and oppose or dissuade workers from strikes, they would be criticized as "traitors of workers." However if they support and lead strikes by standing on the side of workers, they are afraid of violating the rules and are punished by their leaders. Thus a trade union can only serve as an "outsider" . . . mediating between labors [*sic*] and the enterprise managers.

The anemic quality of the country's unions is institutionalized in the provisions of the 2001 revised Trade Union Law, which posits "economic development as the central task" of these bodies in its fourth article (Trade Union Law, 2001). Article 5 of the Law calls on the unions to "assist the people's governments in their work and safeguard the socialist State power under the people's democratic dictatorship." It is not until the sixth article that, finally,

[30]See Bray (2005, pp. 101–104) for the assignments unions have had in contemporary China.

the "basic duties and functions of trade unions" are listed as being "to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of workers and staff members." But the very next dictum returns the unions to their job of mobilizing and organizing workers and staff members "to take an active part in economic development and to strive to fulfill their tasks in production and other work." In case of work stoppages or slow-down strikes, the union will "hold consultation," but especially "assist the enterprise or institution in properly dealing with the matter so as to help restore the normal order of production and other work as soon as possible" (ibid.) It is also of note that full-time officials of the unions are paid by the enterprises in which they work, thereby tying their principal interest to the success of their employer, rather than to the workers (Article 41).

The upshot was that aggrieved Chinese workers in the People's Republic historically were (in ordinary times) unable to derive either assistance or encouragement from their unions. But because workers were not explicitly inhibited by the unions from protesting, there were times (always of apparent regime permissiveness spawned by political movements) that seemed to allow labor to express itself. At such times, when workers did hazard action, at best they might command some weak support from the trade unions.

In the 1990s, however, the situation shifted. A heightened level of activism among the workers in part came simply from newfound freedoms workers experienced in the wake of job loss: Without a secure workplace, they became liberated from constant managerial oversight and enterprise schedules. Their dismissal, in addition, rendered pointless any worry that political involvement might endanger their positions or their perquisites, for these no longer existed (Lee, 1999b; Chen, 2000; Blecher, 2004). And as state-owned firms that were suffering losses disappeared through mergers, foreign takeovers, and bankruptcy, the state's customary apparatus of surveillance could no longer either oversee or restrain what individual workers were doing. The critical point here is that, as marketization and internationalization both inflamed and inspired Chinese workers, they were essentially thrown back upon their own devices when these workers undertook to organize.

Internalization and Marketization

As China opened its markets and gradually reduced the role of the state in the economy from the early 1980s onward, trade unions simultaneously became even weaker. In the past (at least in theory), the union was charged by the state with serving as a model "transmission belt," relaying workers' sentiments upward to the leadership and then delivering official orders back down the line. Once the state plan lost its hold on the economy—and as the Party leaders elected (after the mid-1990s) to mount a huge push for international competitiveness—firms in the hundreds and thousands began to careen into the red and to fold completely, discarding employees in the process. Worker grievances spiked upward significantly in response.[31] Political elites grew fearful of worker rage and aggrievement and the havoc they might wreak, and therefore frequently urged the union on to put all its energies into monitoring and attempting to mollify angry laborers.

Besides, the ongoing privatization of enterprises loosened the grip of the Party, and thus of its lackey, the trade union, while the influx of foreign-invested firms not only introduced novel notions of worker empowerment, but also provided an arena that the unions had

[31] Lee (2007, p. 10) asserts that "the rising tide of labor unrest in China in the past fifteen years is caused by the commodification of labor, a key component of what has been summarily called 'market reform'."

difficulty penetrating (Gallagher, 2005). As a consequence of these developments, unions became useless as agencies for conveying to those at higher echelons, much less championing, the workers' sentiments and charges. All of these factors compelled enterprise-based unions at the grassroots to put most of their efforts into attempting to appease (but, crucially, not to repress) workers involved in incidents of unrest (Rocca, 1999, p. 16; Chan, 2000, pp. 274, 276).

Yet one more factor detrimental to unions' activities was their domination by local party branches focused on maintaining peaceful precincts, especially in an era where potential foreign investors might be scared away by instability and upheaval. But international forces would have made scant headway among the members of the dismissed Chinese work force were it not for the timid posture of the unions and their pitiful position when it came to protest. The weakness and effective absence of their so-called "representative" opened space for workers themselves to take charge.

Results

All of these elements worked in concert to nullify any possibility of unions' representing, protecting, or even effectively supervising Chinese workers in the late 1980s and 1990s, even for union cadres who were openly sympathetic to the plight of the workers. The elevation of order maintenance goals over their prior duties of assisting production, organizing recreation, and dispensing welfare (Morris, 1985, pp. 64–65) was a telling sign of the political elite's perception of an intimate tie between successfully achieving economic reform and productivity, on the one hand, and preventing (or at least placating) much of the resistance that reconstructuring occasioned, on the other. The chief effect of these multiple factors was that, once the political elite chose to prepare the country for global entry and joining SEOs, the sheer impotence of the union (even more pronounced than it had been earlier) forged an aperture in the public arena into which defiant workers (and once-workers) could enter.

The overall outcome of the interaction between governments (both in Beijing and at the grassroots) bent on enforcing order, on the one hand, and disgruntled workers intimidated by the possibility of incarceration, on the other, was far from a stasis. Instead, the debility of the unions, and the absence of any other institutions that could mediate on behalf of the distressed, together served to bolster the workers' drive for expression on the streets in defense of what they deemed their deserts. New freedom growing out of reduced oversight (especially once they had lost their jobs) both sparked and enabled activism. All told, the outcome of internationalization, marketization, and feeble unions was a high propensity for protest, even if the incidents were usually limited in size and scale, typically to the level of the individual workplace (Chen, 2003; Lee, 2007).

FRANCE AND MEXICO

The French State and Its Workers

The French working class long sustained a habit of looking to the state for resolving its grievances. Legal restrictions on unionization for several decades after World War II depressed the possibilities for trade union intermediation, a prohibition that served, until 1968, to thrust the workers directly into the arms of the state when they felt they were being mistreated. Even into the 1980s, half of the private-sector workers were still employed in

places that barred representation.[32] Despite that restrictiveness, the state, whether via legislation or by means of administrative rulings, inserted itself in the unions' stead as the protector of the working class (Kesselman, 1989, p. 166; 1996, pp. 145, 147, 151).

Workers as a group were splintered in several ways, further frustrating union-based actions. This divisiveness meant, first of all, that their allegiance to often warring unions obstructed efforts at jointly coordinated action. Secondly, workers were separated by a dual labor market that insured that public-sector workers were far more likely to be organized than were those in private firms, and consequently, to enjoy better working conditions and benefits (Kesselman, 1996, p. 147). These distinctions only increased over time. In and after the late 1970s, shocks from the world market produced an altered management strategy, marked by resort to flexible hours and part-time work, an approach that only deepened the segmentation within the already two-tiered workforce.[33] The strikes that ensued from this legacy of splits and disunity tended to be spontaneous, scattered, brief, confrontational, and, after the mid-1970s, in defense of jobs and benefits.

Rather than taking aim at their immediate bosses, as was the case in China, however, workers often specifically targeted the state, perhaps reflecting a sense of betrayal by their one-time benefactor (Boyer, 1984, pp. 27, 30; Ross, 1984, pp. 51–56; Wilson, 1985, p. 258; Kesselman, 1996, p. 150; Smith, 2000, p. 129). These differences notwithstanding, the hindrances to integrated action added up to a situation not so different from the one that obtained in the China of the 1990s and thereafter, even if the geneaology of the obstacles was not the same. Instead of relying on coordinated battles organized by unions, French workers' actions, as in China, also ranged from factory occupations to petitions, marches, and short demonstrations.

Unlike the Chinese, however, French labor was able to transcend this insulation and occasionally mobilize on a national scale. The members of the proletariat could reach out to and attract members of other occupations, as they did with success at several junctures, setting democratic France apart from authoritarian China (Kesselman, 1984a, p. 317; Moss, 1988, p. 70). On rare occasions the unions mustered sufficient cooperatation to incite the entire French populace on a broad, cross-class scale—in 1968, to some extent in the mid-1980s (on behalf of the steel industry), in 1995, and in 2003. Each time, their activities went far beyond the typical plant or even industry-centered "strike" (Boyer, 1984, p. 23; Daley, 1992, p. 168; Kesselman, 1996, p. 144). And while the 1995 movement, for example, did evince the unions' ability to arouse French society, its major achievement was simply to compel the state to call off some of its chief proposals and to decelerate its program of cutbacks (Kesselman, 1996, pp. 156–160; Rodrick, 1997, pp. 1, 41–43; Levy and Bruhn, 2006, pp. 336–337).

So all in all, it would seem that the French state's trepidation about confrontation with the workers, paired with labor's inclination to rely on the state, would normally have disposed workers to appeal their retrenchment-era tribulations directly upward through protest, in the absence of other effective channels (Stevens, 2003, p. 247).[34] But instead the workers' tendency to demonstrate declined after the early 1980s, in part a result of the terms of attachment between workers, the unions, and the state. Although the efficacy of the unions had always been somewhat diminished by their usual incapacity to act in unison, particularly

[32]As of 1982, collective bargaining was required legally in firms with 50 or more employees, although not even all of these observed the law (e.g., Kesselman, 1989, p. 166; 1996, pp. 145–147).

[33]In that new labor market, "only a fraction of workers could hope for a decent and reasonably permanent job" (Boyer, 1984, pp. 30–31).

[34]Stevens (2003, p. 247), for example, writes of a "long tradition in France of direct action and confrontation with authorities."

critical in this period was their diminishing memberships, as global economic forces (and the power of these forces to reshape state economic policy) reduced their clout.

The French Unions and International Influences

All told, French union politics were historically convoluted, the terrain they occupied furrowed by their complicated interrelations, their unpopularity with and lack of control over much of the workforce (Wilson, 1985, p. 277), as well as the enmity with which employers viewed them. That the three leading unions[35] shifted their political agendas with some regularity was just one more factor that made it difficult for unions as a whole to coalesce around any one shared position at the same time (Wilson, 1985, pp. 268–271; Kesselman, 1989, pp. 167–174; Smith, 2000, pp. 125–300). This disharmony had the unfortunate effect of putting off many workers, who realized that internecine conflict often lay at the core of labor's difficulties in winning a victory (Schain, 1984, p. 257; Wilson, 1985, pp. 257–258; Smith, 1998, p. 219). Inter-union rivalry meant not only that the unions all attempted to capture the same membership base, but also that they quarreled over ideology, tactics, and ultimate control. The tensions among them allowed employers and governments to manipulate the various confederations, even as the latter vied among themselves to out-bargain their competitors (Schain, 1984, p. 257; Wilson, 1985, p. 259; Kesselman, 1989, p. 165; Ross, 1984, p. 53).

Compounding these problems, international competition and the structural obsolescence of much of French industry after the 1970s meant that with time, the decline of the sectors of industry (smokestack, in particular) in which unions once held a foothold operated to drive union membership lower than in most of Western Europe.[36] From a high point in the early and mid-1970s when unions absorbed just one quarter of the French workforce, membership dropped below ten percent by 1992 (Daley, 1992, p. 159; Kesselman, 1996, p. 149).[37]

Unlike in China, where unions' traditional role became attenuated with nothing much to replace it, French unions assumed a new role that empowered them, but led them to switch to the use of nonconfrontational tactics. With the enactment of what were termed the "Auroux reforms" in 1982, organized labor was charged with promoting firm-level collective bargaining and, through that approach, the active enforcement of peace in the plants (Kesselman, 1984a, pp. 313–314; 1989, p. 166–167).

Results

The historical peak of French protest passed with the mid-1970s,[38] after which, with internationally generated economic setbacks for the French proletariat and an austerity program at home, labor's activism declined decisively.[39] The outcome was that in the years after

[35]The CGT, the Confederation Francaise et Democratique du Travail, and the Force Ouvriere.

[36]Kesselman (1984b, p. 1; 1996, p. 152) posits that "structural changes in the French and world economy have been the primary cause of the decline of organized labor."

[37]According to Smith (2000, p. 130), overall membership declined by more than half over a 16-year period, from 30 percent of the labor force in 1975 down to 14 percent in 1991.

[38]Aside from the enormous marches and rallies of late 1995.

[39]Following what is known as the "U-turn" of President Francois Mitterrand after 1982, when he gave up worker-friendly policies to focus on inflation-fighting and French terms of trade, workers and unions were reactive at first, but then became silent for most of the rest of the decade (Wilson, 1985, pp. 275–276; Moss, 1988, pp. 74–76; Schmidt, 1999; Smith, 2000, pp. 128–130), with some initial exceptions in auto and steel production (Kesselman, 1984a, p. 320; Daley, 1992; Schmidt, 1996, p. 127; Smith, 2000, p. 129).

1980 outbursts of any kind were notably few, as workers became discouraged by their helplessness and frustrated by the lack of clear guidance or assistance from any semblance of coherent or powerful mediating associations. With the exception of a few major, societally widespread strikes (such as those in 1995 and 2003), the scattered, small-scale incidents that did break out occasionally were often organized by independent groups outside the sphere of the unions. The propensity to strike, historically high (Kesselman, 1984b, p. 1), remained present, but only at times of intense provocation, as in 1995.

So in the French case we see a withering of a habit of protest that had once existed, a relative pacification of the unions as perpetrators that had been their role in the past, not a rise to a new challenge by labor under changed circumstances with altered possibilities, as in China. International forces buffeted both countries, but the fragmented French unions perhaps proved more equal to the job than did the subservient, servant-like unions attached to the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese workers, to the contrary, broke free of their union, and achieved a lot more in the way of disturbances without it.

The Mexican State and Its Workers

After the formation of the present Mexican state in the post-Revolutionary days of the 1920s, its leaders demonstrated a responsiveness to labor, paired with a rhetoric of workers' rights on one hand, but with efforts to keep the unions under strict controls in order to preempt unrest, on the other (Teichman, 1995, pp. 48–49; Meyer, 1998, pp. 19, 140). The latter tendency was rooted in a fear of upheaval sparked during the Revolution of 1910–1917 and never forgotten (Coleman and Davis, 1983, p. 5; Haggard and Kaufman, 1995, p. 284). Of the three states compared in this paper, it was Mexico whose constitution was the most generous and sympathetic to the working class, in principle offering the rights to engage in collective bargaining, to form unions and to strike, in addition to granting social rights and benefits (Middlebrook, 1989b, p. 202).[40] But in practice, the regime retained concrete authority over labor, and was equipped with the military and police power to bring order when it elected to do so (Kaufman, 1986, p. 198; Teichman, 1995, pp. 59–61, 67, 199).

The state sustained its rule—and the PRI its hegemony—through an implicit bargain with the workers: proletarian placidity rested on an arrangement whereby state-connected workers could count for decades on job security and favorable work conditions, as long as they held up their end of the deal, which was to provide a support base for the PRI during elections and to keep quiet at other times. The government's economic achievements, paired with and often made more possible through this pact, secured a high measure of labor peace in Mexico, especially among the most protected tier of the workforce.[41]

But this pact did not preclude restrictiveness and occasional ruthlessness on the part of the state. Law neither bestowed on unions any responsibility to represent their worker constituents, nor did it authorize the unions to negotiate collective contracts or to wage strikes unless they had first acquired official recognition. This recognition and the right to register were both treated as privileges, moreover, and were not lightly granted. Even after a union had succeeded in becoming registered, there was still no assured freedom to strike. Explicit state permission was required in every instance, while an array of prohibitions limited

[40]The Federal Labor Code of 1931 elaborated these principles (see Middlebrook, 1995, pp. 63–64).

[41]These sheltered workers included those attached to the PRI, and the ones belonging to sectoral federations, which represented workers in state-owned firms (Collier and Collier, 1991, Ch. 7).

waging a strike, with disobedience potentially entailing immediate job loss for the participants (Middlebrook, 1989, p. 197; 1995, pp. 64–65, 68–69; Teichman, 1995, pp. 52–53). At times of resistance, the regime was ready with rewards for those willing to abandon the effort, and with repression against those who were not, sometimes including arrests and imprisonment.

The latter tactics were to assist the state in preventing labor discontent from interfering with its program of privatization, economic liberalization, and retrenchment in and after the 1980s (Collier, 1992, p. 137; Middlebrook, 1995, pp. 295, 300–301; Teichman, 1995, p. 212).[42] Thus, a potential refuge from coercion, available to a subset of the workforce (and conditioned on loyalty and compliance), sustained the broad outlines of the Mexican labor regime and the state's economic strategy historically and into the present. Workers advantaged by this system developed a sense of entitlements and expectations and were in fact able to rely on their party bosses to supply the goods they counted on. And so the legacy of favorable treatment that PRI-connected workers had experienced for dozens of years shored up their loyalty. This faithfulness disposed them to stick with the PRI in the wake of austerity, even as the Party progressively reversed its historical connection with labor after the early 1980s (Collier, 1992, p. 110).[43]

The Mexican Unions

Even before the period when Mexico turned outward, labor unions represented (in 1978) just 16.3 percent of Mexico's economically active population, and the Confederation of Mexican Workers (*Confederacion de Trabajadores Mexicanos* [CTM]) was the putative agent for a third of all unionized workers (Middlebrook, 1989, p. 212).[44] But despite its place in the sun, even the CTM was ultimately vulnerable (Collier, 1992, p. 35; Haggard and Kaufman, 1995, p. 287; Middlebrook, 1995, p. 35; Camp, 1999, p. 142), for the PRI might at any time play this confederation off against two rival ones.[45] There were alternative options for workers before the 1990s—especially in the precariously placed independent unions that did exist, particularly in the 1970s—but the outcome for a worker who took part in them was unpredictable and could often be dangerous. Indeed, in order to ensure its pride of place, the CTM had long performed a critical role in assisting the Party to suppress attempts at forming independent unions, entities that, had they had the space to do so, would have championed and

[42]Such measures also were drawn upon to quell opposition to PRI candidate Carlos Salinas's 1988 bid for the Presidency, with the continuation of austerity, liberalization, and internationalization that his rule would promise.

[43]Compared with the situation in China, even the status of privileged workers in Mexico was contingent. Any sign of opposition or disloyalty on the part of a particular worker could mean that he might displease the PRI and lose his job or rank. Thus, the opportunity workers in Mexico (unlike those in China) had to affiliate with a union other than the PRI-blessed one could at times expose the potentially vindictive nature and uncertain protection of the PRI (Teichman, 1995, pp. 62–67).

[44]Levy and Bruhn (2006, pp. 74–75), basing their estimate on ILO figures (see www.ilo.org), however, state that about 43 percent of non-agricultural salaried workers belonged to unions in 2000. Teichman (1995, p. 48) nonetheless observed from a different perspective that "the industries of highest state participation have experienced the most advanced unionization . . . where the rate of unionization in industry in general was 26 percent in 1975, it was 78.6 percent in the extraction industries, 97.9 percent in electricity and gas and 84.9 percent in transportation."

[45]Such a course of action by the Party leadership might have been prompted by one stand or another that the union's leaders took temporarily, or when the Party was angered by the confederation's short-term failure to march in lockstep with every policy the PRI proposed (Middlebrook, 1989a, p. 294; Roxborough, 1989, pp. 104–105; Collier, 1992, p. 83).

fought for rights and benefits for groups beyond the selected elite (Sklair, 1989, pp. 58, 61–62).[46]

After the austerity of the 1980s set in, the position of the CTM and some of its bosses shifted somewhat. Yet even as union leaders who were affiliated with the PRI castigated the party's stance in the 1980s, they remained its partner (Burgess, 1992). For the most part they also refrained from arousing their workers in protest against the reform platform. Consequently, while strikes in Mexico were never plentiful, their numbers dropped by 80 percent in the decade following the accession to power of President de la Madrid in 1982.[47]

Meanwhile, the Mexican regime became increasingly indiscriminate in its impulse to subvert and quash decisively worker opposition from any quarter at all, willing even to turn its back at times on its long-time ally, the CTM, rather than accede to demands that would tend to disrupt the austerity program (Middlebrook, 1989a, p. 293–294; 1995, p. 260; Collier, 1992, pp. 106–107, 139). Unlike in China, where only the leaders of protests were apprehended in demonstrations, in similar instances in Mexico ordinary followers also stood in danger of forfeiting their jobs (Middlebrook, 1995, p. 69; Burgess, 1999). So while seemingly leaderless demonstrations were plentiful in China, such developments were rare indeed in Mexico.

Marketization and Internationalization

As in China and France, Mexico's economic reforms and liberalization had an impact upon protest possibilities in ways other than at the polls: "The process of privatization set in motion..the disintegration" of the modalities the government, working through the PRI, had utilized for decades to bind the state-sector unions to the state apparatus by way of discriminatory benefits (Teichman, 1995, p. 50; see also Middlebrook, 1995, p. 267 and Levy and Bruhn, 2001, p. 77). The PRI was forced to relinquish some of its ability to privilege a set of incorporated unions when the state undertook a massive sell-off of public firms.[48] Modifications in the state's role in the economy, made in the name of international competitiveness and efficiency, thus combined to undermine the powers of patronage and clientelism that had formerly incorporated the "official" unions into the regime (Roxborough, 1989, p. 91; Collier, 1992, p. 107; Middlebrook, 1995, pp. 256, 297; Teichman, 1995, pp. 199–200, 205; Rochlin, 1997, p. 30; Burgess, 1999, p. 106).[49] In short, the reforms eroded, although did not eliminate altogether, the special perquisites that bound the most privileged workers to the dominant party.

All told, Mexican protest after 1980, like that in France, became infrequent in the 1980s. In an exaggeration of the French pattern, however, the expression of grievances that did

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[46]On the other hand, sectors that were most crucial to the overall economy, and which, accordingly, received the strongest state pressure for compliance, were also the ones displaying the boldest resistance to the state (Teichman, 1995, p. 49).

[47]Carr (1996, p. 222) enumerated the number of strikes that occurred between January 1982 and December 1991.

[48]In addition to the regulations on trade posed by NAFTA, trade internationalization was detrimental to the unions in another way: it meant that state leaders were well aware that foreign investors could move out their funds if the state was too sympathetic to worker demands (Dion, 2002, pp. 10–11).

[49]The outcome is neatly summarized in Hellman (2002, p. 457):"The implementation of a radical new economic policy not only changed the political and economic environment in which protest movements developed, but altered protestors' sense of what was possible or useful to demand and shifted contentious politics out of the traditional corporatist channels and onto a far less stable and predictable political terrain."

occur was much more limited in duration and far more contained in scale. The effectiveness of this opposition, moreover, was minimal to negligible. Insofar as there were any achievements at all,[50] only the affiliates of the CTM received benefits, while workers as a group continued to suffer from the government's wage policy and program of retrenchment (Middlebrook, 1995, pp. 264–265, 295–297). Other outcomes issuing from protest included at best delays of unfavorable policies. The CTM's greatest accomplishment was its prevention of the Salinas administration's rewriting of the federal labor code, a reform yet stalled at the time this paper went to press in October 2007. Overall, the duet that defined the terms attaching the chief union to the ruling party remained largely undisturbed. As a result, CTM bosses buttressed the platform of the PRI, much as they always had.

CONCLUSION

In China and the two other countries examined in this paper, the important factor in assessing changes in the workers' propensity to strike after cutbacks (as compared with such an inclination in the past) was *the extent and nature of the power that labor unions exercised over and against (rather than for) the workers.* In the end, unions turned out to be less significant in the traditional ways scholars expect them to be: it was not that they initiated more strikes and demonstrations in China than in France or Mexico, or that in other ways they fought for their members there in the face of regime reversal on labor issues. After all, all three countries were places where unions were historically inadequate vessels for accumulating and transmitting worker impulses. Instead, it was the *absence* of active, assertive unions in China[51] that gave Chinese workers an opportunity to demonstrate on their own.

In addition to unions, I also considered the role played by internationalization and its concomitant economic reforms in shaping workers' situations. I was interested first in the power of privatization, induced in all three cases by influences from abroad, to release workers who were once tied to and dependent on the state and its largesse. The retreat of the state, a feature particularly marked in China, did indeed enable labor to achieve a new measure of freedom to express its needs and grievances. But I discovered that economic liberalization and international trends and pressures did not necessarily produce a common amount of political opening for workers' resistance. Whether or not the new openness in the economy mattered for activism depended on how the relevant unions behaved both toward the state (and its ruling party) and toward the workers in the wake of that liberalization. Thus, the power of economic liberalization to arouse labor's proclivities to demonstrate depended, in these cases, only in part upon the type of regime in which such reform was taking place. It depended much more on the role and the power (and absence of power) of the unions in each country.

In understanding the possibilities for worker demonstrations to break out, it turned out that the concept of "union" needed to be interrogated, since unions performed quite differing roles in the three different contexts. And in none of them did unions behave as standard accounts presume they would. Ultimately, I found most critical the extent to which unions had to answer to the state, but perhaps even more important, the degree to which they had clout—whether coercive, as in Mexico, or insufficiently collaborative, as in France—with

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[50]For example, the 1987 Economic Solidarity Pact, in which income taxes were cut and inflation arrested.

[51]The sole union there was neither repressive, as in Mexico, nor was it one of the several quibbling, competing ones losing members, as in France.

respect to the workers.[52] Having little to no clout, as in China, turned out to be the most conducive of all for resistance in the face of the incursion of foreign economic forces.

Thus, these three cases suggest the following hypotheses: where marketization has disengaged workers from the clutch of the state, where workers have a high level of expectation of the state, and (most critically) where unions are largely impotent (whether under their superiors, as in Mexico, among themselves, as in France, or over the workers, as in China), the outcomes for protest cannot be simply predicted by regime type, as has often been thought. And, critically, weak unions can be weak in a number of ways, some of which may actually facilitate protest under particular conditions. The end of socialism, counterintuitively, can produce more protest than can democracy under these conditions.

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[52]Murillo (2001, Ch. 9) looking at subnational as well as national variation, has extended and explained these distinctions elegantly.

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