

CHINA'S WORKERS AND THE WORLD

BY JOHN J. SWEENEY

In these remarks delivered at the “Conference for Action: Human Rights for the Millions” in June, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney observes why the international community has a direct interest in promoting labor rights in China.

I'm honored to be with you today at this important conference. My congratulations to Sharon Hom [Executive Director, HRIC] and Han Dongfang [Executive Director, China Labour Bulletin] for this excellent turnout and program.

This morning you began trying to deal with the biggest question facing working people the world over: “How do 750 million Chinese workers—one fourth of the world's workforce—enter the global economy in a manner that promotes human rights in China and around the world?”

Multinational companies haven't waited for an answer—they've rushed to China as the new frontier for their investment and export industries. For global corporations, trade with China is too attractive to pass up and China is changing—its closed culture is opening up and its people are experiencing new choices, new opportunities, new perils.

But in the vital area of human rights, China has changed little. Capitalism is flourishing there in an utterly repressive political dictatorship that competes by offering investors disciplined and suppressed labor.

That is why this conference is so important. For the labor movement and for all in this room, enforcing workers' rights is a moral imperative, a democratic imperative and an economic necessity. Workers' rights are vital to development and to prosperity the world over. And if workers in China cannot gain those rights and a fair share of the profits and productivity they help generate, human rights abuses and inequality will grow to obscene levels the world over. If we allow China to lead a race to the bottom in workers' rights and make itself the manufacturing center of the world, other developing countries will have no choice but to suppress their workers to compete.

Some have argued that protecting the rights of workers is a recent political strategy, one born of protectionist and isolationist sentiment. Those of us who call New York home have a

different perspective, one that began nearly a century ago just a few miles from here when a fire started in a rag bin at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. The fire swept through the factory, where hundreds of young girls and women sewed garments 10 to 12 hours a day, seven days a week. The doors to each floor were locked. The workers were trapped. One hundred and forty-six workers were burned or crushed to death. It took our labor movement decades to avenge those deaths, but we finally achieved sensible labor standards and won livable wages and benefits for manufacturing workers in our country.

A century later, we were reminded that such a struggle never ends when 93 workers were killed and 156 more were injured—most of them young women—when a fire collapsed a textile factory in Zhuhai, China. Then in 2003 a fire broke out at a natural gas facility in Kaixian near Chongqing, and another 243 people were killed, with more than 2,000 others hospitalized and 65,000 evacuated from their homes.

These tragedies—almost a century apart, but hauntingly alike—help us place where we are. The Triangle fire took place in a U.S. economy in profound transition—from local to national, from agricultural to manufacturing. The dominant belief of the day was an extreme laissez-faire doctrine. Property rights were protected, but workers' rights were literally against the law. It took decades of struggle by our unions to bring about change. Today, those conditions dominate workers in China, and the same beliefs dominate the China debate. And conditions are so bad and the beliefs are so strong that without significant international intervention, China will never change—and China will quite literally drag U.S. workers and communities “back to the future.”

Here's a dramatic example of what I'm talking about. In 2003, Wal-Mart purchased over \$15 billion of merchandise from China. More than 5,400 factories work as its suppliers, providing employment for hundreds of thousands of workers. One of the textile suppliers is located in a mountainous area of Zhejiang Province, where investigators found pathetic working conditions, unlivable wages and murderous work loads. One 41-year-old worker told the investigators that she worked extremely long hours without any break in order to finish her quota—smoothing over 50,000 yards of cloth everyday. For that, she received approximately \$45 per month, an income that barely allowed her to buy food for her family. In China, The

Washington Post reports, Wal-Mart uses its market power to force its suppliers to pay less than China's minimum wage.

Wal-Mart is forcing wages down in China. Then in the United States, Wal-Mart comes into a community and offers a showcase of low-cost goods, but also undermines wage rates and benefits. Wal-Mart is driving down wages here just as surely as it is driving down wages in China.

Our challenge is to confront this kind of destructive partnership by developing a broader, stronger coalition of workers, human rights activists and concerned citizens across the world to demand the enforcement of core workers' rights in China.

To move forcefully in this direction, the AFL-CIO recently filed a challenge, under U.S. law, to China's labor practices. Our petition charges that China's repression of internationally recognized workers' rights constitutes an unfair trade practice under Section 301 (d) of the Trade Act, and that such repression "burdens or restricts U.S. commerce." It is the first time in the history of Section 301 that a petition has invoked the violation of workers' rights as an unfair trade practice, although it is quite common for corporations to challenge unfair trade practices such as violation of intellectual property rights under this law. Yet Section 301 explicitly recognizes persistent failure to enforce internationally recognized workers' rights standards as an unreasonable trade practice. Those standards include freedom of association—the right to organize and bargain collectively, freedom from forced or compulsory labor, freedom from child labor, and freedom from discrimination.

We had no trouble documenting violations by China, and we did so extensively and calculated the cost to U.S. workers and U.S. companies using standard, accepted methods—but despite our compelling case, the Bush Administration denied our petition. This poses a fundamental challenge to the labor movement, but also to the human rights movement and those who believe in the rule of law. We have succeeded in writing core human rights into the law. And now the Bush Administration, in a case of fundamental and global importance and scope, is refusing to enforce the law.

China today stands in violation of the core labor rights codified in the International Labor Organization's 1998 Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, which is binding on all members of the ILO. China today stands in violation of workers' right of association protected by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which China signed in 1998. China today stands in violation of workers' right to form and join the trade union of their choice, enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which China ratified in 2001. In the absence of material incentives to enforce these international commitments, China will continue to violate them.

Here in the U.S., those "material incentives" include requiring human rights and workers' rights protections in all of our trade agreements, and stronger enforcement of existing trade laws. For our part, the American labor movement hopes to help replace the Bush Administration with one that will endorse those incentives and aid us in extending the rights of workers around the world.

But dealing with China will take even more; it will take an

unprecedented amount of international cooperation and action.

First, we must consolidate an alliance between human rights groups, labor activists and citizens of conscience both here in the U.S. and around the world. That alliance, I hope, will be a step in that direction. For the global labor movement, I can pledge that we will mobilize a broad global consensus on workers' rights and on China. But we also need human rights groups to make this a central part of their agenda. If the defenders of the status quo can dismiss labor's protests as protectionist wailings by the privileged workers of the U.S., the truth about China will be buried and the human rights catastrophe will be hard to reverse. But if human rights groups demand that the law be enforced, if they document the reality of labor suppression, and if they decry the trampling of core workers' rights in China and elsewhere, our efforts can succeed dramatically in the court of world opinion.

Second, we must intensify international support for Chinese workers in their struggle to gain an independent voice at work. We must join together to assist Chinese partners to raise issues of core labor standards, democratic development, and violations of workers' rights in Chinese factories.

Third, we must support the growth and protect the rights of democratic unions in Hong Kong. The unions in Hong Kong are the mainstay of the democracy movement. They demonstrate the power and the potential of independent unions. They are the leading advocates within the international labor movement for workers' rights in China. Not surprisingly, the Chinese government would like to shut them down. We must make certain that they have active international support and solidarity.

Fourth, we must begin a dialogue with responsible companies to press for basic workers' rights in their factories and in the factories of their subcontractors. It is an outrage that advanced industrial companies drive conditions down in China rather than lifting them up. We must challenge them in their board meetings and among their consumers. We must mount broad legal and public education drives against companies that are violators, and nurture the brave companies that are prepared to recognize core workers' rights in their own factories.

Finally, we must relentlessly and aggressively campaign against the suppression of core workers' rights in China in every international arena. We can no longer allow human rights organizations like the UN Commission on Human Rights to ignore China or allow global human rights gatherings to take place without forcing resolutions exposing the Chinese suppression of core workers' rights. This is not simply a cause of the labor movement. It is a central cause for all of us who fight for basic human rights.

China aspires to be the world's foundry, its manufacturing center. Its development can help foster workers' rights and democracy across the world—or China can lead a race to the bottom in which not only workers but basic rights will lose.

As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached, the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice. But that only happens because of the tireless efforts of people of conscience and good will—people like all of you in this room. Thank you and God bless you all for the great work you are doing.