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# In China, Unlikely Labor Leader Just Wanted a Middle-Class Life

By **DAVID BARBOZA**

SHANGHAI — Tan Guocheng is hardly a self-styled labor leader. Age 23 and introverted, he grew up among rice paddies and orange groves far from China's big factory towns.

But last month, an hour into his shift at a **Honda** factory in the southern city of Foshan, Mr. Tan pressed an emergency button that shut down his production line.

"Let's go out on strike!" he shouted. Within minutes, hundreds of workers were abandoning their posts.

Colleagues described Mr. Tan's leadership as an uncharacteristic act of courage; Mr. Tan said he simply wanted a pay raise. Regardless, he has helped touch off a wave of strikes at Honda plants and other workplaces in China that are still playing out in surprising and significant ways.

Though Mr. Tan has since been fired by Honda for "sabotage" and moved back to his village, striking workers at another Honda plant less than 100 miles away in Zhongshan marched in the streets on Friday and made a new demand: the right to form an independent labor union.

"This is a remarkable development," said Anita Chan, a labor expert at the University of Technology in Sydney. "Most strikes in China tend to be about not being paid or being mistreated. This was different. The workers were demanding very high salaries. And they want to elect union leaders democratically."

The two-week strike at Mr. Tan's plant forced Honda to shut down its four assembly plants in China and to eventually offer 1,900 workers in Foshan a 24 to 32 percent pay raise. That got to the heart of Mr. Tan's complaint.

Leaving his home in central China four years ago, Mr. Tan had hoped that working on an assembly line for a global company like Honda would be his path to a middle-class future.

But the pay was meager, he says, and inflation ate away at his earnings. And last January, when Honda offered to increase his \$175 monthly salary by a mere \$7, Mr. Tan, who planned to marry soon, was distraught. It was not enough money to buy a house or raise a child.

"I couldn't understand how they could give us so little," he said. So he decided to fight back.

Honda declined to offer details about the Foshan strike, where many of the workers were as young as 19. But the walkout, like the Honda strike in Zhongshan, has touched off debate in this country about not only wages and labor conditions but also the rising expectations of a new generation of young workers.

For years, China's economic boom has been driven by young people from poor, interior provinces migrating to coastal factory towns to work long hours for little pay, often six or seven days a week, in steamy, high-pressure factories. But workers like Tan Guocheng say they want better jobs and a larger share of the fruits of China's economic miracle.

Mr. Tan's journey from migrant worker to labor organizer began in a small farming community near the city of Shaoyang, in central China's Hunan Province, where [Mao Zedong](#) was born.

His parents grow rice and manage an orange grove on a small plot of land that earns them about \$2,500 a year. But the family plot is too small for him and his older brother and younger sister to earn a living, Mr. Tan says. And so all three of them struck out for the east, as migrant workers.

He moved in 2006. After high school, he had studied at a vocational school in Changsha, Hunan's capital city. A job placement agency allied with the school found work for him at a Honda factory nearly 500 miles away in Guangzhou.

The agency kept a percentage of his salary — a fairly common practice, Mr. Tan said. But he found that employees who were hired directly by Honda were making up to four times his monthly salary of \$175.

"We were doing basically the same thing, but this middleman agency was taking some of our money," he says.

Hoping for a better opportunity, he transferred to Honda's transmission factory, a short distance away, in Foshan. But the pay was essentially the same, he said, and the job a set of bleak and monotonous routines.

He left home every morning at 5:15 to commute 70 minutes by bus to a job that started at 6:55, and ended at 3:40 pm. He said workers were often forced to switch their shifts — sometimes working days, sometimes nights — leaving many of them continually exhausted.

He saw the \$7 raise last January as the final insult.

"I came up with the idea of going on strike," he said. But it was not easy, he said, trying to recruit colleagues in secret talks on the factory floor during breaks. He says he tried to persuade five or six senior workers on his assembly line to strike, but, "They said they weren't brave enough."

"I said: 'I'll be the one to lead.' And they said, 'OK, we'll follow you.' "

A week before the strike, 15 or so workers from Mr. Tan's workshop had a meeting outside the factory one night to discuss the plan. "Before that," he said, "we'd had random talks on the shuttle bus to work."

A 20-year-old worker named Xiao Lang, also from Hunan, agreed to help lead the strike — partly, the two now say, because they had decided to resign from the company regardless of the outcome.

By the morning of May 17, nearly 50 workers — many of them also from Hunan Province — were in on the plan. By agreement, when Mr. Tan hit that emergency stop button at 7:50 a.m., Mr. Xiao was doing the same thing on a separate, nearby production line.

Within minutes, workers were marching through the factory rallying others to join the strike.

"There were hundreds of us going from door to door," Mr. Tan said "Several managers tried to stop us with verbal threats. But we ignored them."

Betting that their strike might create a ripple effect among the network of Honda suppliers and assembly plants in southern China, Mr. Tan's team alerted the Chinese news media, which gradually gave the strike national publicity.

The strikers were prepared to demand a doubling of their monthly wage to 2,000 renminbi — about \$293 — and nothing less, Mr. Tan said. Panicked, Honda

persuaded the workers to return to work the next day, May 18, promising to consider the demands.

But when no deal was struck by May 21, the workers went back on strike, which China's English-language daily newspaper described as "the largest industrial action ever reported in China."

Before they were scheduled to formally resign at the end of May, Honda fired Mr. Tan and Mr. Xiao on May 22.

On June 4, after intense negotiations involving the local government in Foshan and Japanese executives, Honda agreed to a large pay raise, though short of the workers' demand for nearly doubling their salary.

Most of the workers returned to their jobs, satisfied with the raise and their victory over Honda, according to several workers.

Mr. Xiao is now taking driving lessons, hoping to get work operating a van in Hunan Province.

Mr. Tan has also returned home to Hunan. He says his parents do not yet know about his leadership at Foshan. They think he came back home to find a better job.

Now, he is taking a three-month course to learn to operate excavation equipment. He hopes to find work somewhere in Hunan. His wife, whom he married in April, is still working in southern China.

And while he did not set out to be a labor organizer, he said he was proud of what he had accomplished in Foshan.

"I think we can call it a success," he said. "I only led the strike to earn my fellow workers a decent reward."

*Chen Xiaoduan contributed research.*