

Workers Demand Union at Wal-Mart Supplier in China

By HOWARD W. FRENCH

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SHENZHEN, China, Dec. 15 - The scene on the street did not look like much, just the comings and goings of small groups of women from their factory dormitory, with a few lingering here and there in knots to discuss their situation.

Since Friday, though, work has stopped inside the Uniden factory's walls here, where 12,000 workers, mostly young women from China's poor interior provinces, make wireless phones, which the Japanese manufacturer supplies in large number to the giant American retailer Wal-Mart.

China's laws tightly proscribe public demonstrations, so the women found another way to vent their anger over their wages, and what they said were many other abusive work conditions. They met secretly to draw up a list of demands, and then walked off the job.

Wal-Mart has been much in the news recently in China, with the government insisting that the retailer do what it refuses to do in the United States: allow all its workers to join unions.

But what the scene at the Uniden plant here in Shenzhen, the very heartland of China's export-led resurgence, reveals is a situation much more typical in this country's booming new economy, where the government has been reluctant to enforce laws that would oblige foreign companies to allow unions, for fear of losing overseas investment.

The hordes of young women employed here say they are required to work 11-hour days, including three hours of mandatory overtime, to earn a basic monthly salary of 484 yuan, or about \$58.

The women say they must spend nearly half their wage on the drab company dormitories where, as migrants, they must live. They laughed ruefully when asked if they were able to save any money, or send money back to their families.

"No, I haven't been able to save any money," said Liu Shuangyan, outside the factory gates. "You have to eat. You buy a few clothes, and then there's nothing left."

"If you get sick," added Ms. Liu, a native of Hunan Province, "they won't give you leave unless it is very serious."

A friend and fellow worker from Hunan, Wang Lifang, then spoke up to say, "They have a small clinic, but you have to pay, and the medicines they give you are much more expensive than outside."

Other young women said that many minors were employed in the plant, and that most of the employees had been forced to pay 200 yuan under the table as a job-finder's fee in order to be hired.

Some women said they had little idea what a union was, but yearned for some kind of representation that could serve as their advocate. Others said with certainty that no union existed, and ascribed their plight in large part to this fact.

"If there were a union, things would be fairer for us," said one 32-year-old woman from Henan Province. "Right now, one person says one thing, another complains about another, and the boss doesn't listen to anything."

Workers said the strike began when a senior Japanese manager was overheard saying to a Chinese supervisor that the employees would be foolish to accept the terms of a new contract being offered them. Others said it was caused by abusive dismissals of workers with seniority to make way for cheaper, more pliable replacements.

Japanese officials at the company, reached by telephone, refused to comment, passing the phone to a Chinese manager. The manager, who declined to identify himself, said, "A group of workers' contracts have reached termination, and the company, in conformance with labor laws, did not offer them a new contract."

Believing the questions were coming from a caller in New York, the Chinese manager said the strike had ended, early in the afternoon, and the situation had returned to normal.

"If you could get into a spaceship right now and come over, you'd see for yourself," he said, laughing.

Meanwhile, plainclothes security agents milled outside of the plant. As soon as a foreigner began taking photographs of the continuing work stoppage, they called the police.

Analysts of China's labor scene say strikes like this are becoming far more common as younger migrant workers exposed to the wealth of China's relatively rich eastern cities grow increasingly angry over what many see as their exploitation. Although few are unionized, communication and coordination among them is growing, often through the sending of coded messages to each other by cellphone.

"The migrant workers have learned to protest with their feet, they are more capable of negotiating, and they can choose not to work," said Liu Kaiming, who studies conditions of migrant workers in Guangdong Province. "That has especially been true recently, with a lot of the migrant workers who were born in the 1980's entering the workforce. They've had a better education, they're young and emotional, and they've been emboldened by media reports about their conditions to demand their rights."

All the women interviewed seemed determined to press their demands, the most important of which, they said, were shorter work hours and enforcement of minimum-wage laws.

Asked if they were afraid of losing their jobs, they scoffed at the idea, saying workers were in short supply in Shenzhen's vast manufacturing zone.

"If we were men, there would have been a strike a long time ago," one woman said. "Women are easier to bully, but we have hearts of steel."