

Workers in China and Germany under the Crisis

In September 2009, an exchange meeting, titled "Capitalism in Crisis", of 12 Chinese labour and social movement activists with their German counterparts took place at Hilchenbach (Germany), organised by Asienstiftung and Globalization Monitor, and supported by AMRC (Hong Kong), TIE Global, Labournet Germany, Südwind Institute, express magazine, and Werkstatt Ökonomie. The meeting's goal was to build concrete exchange relations and to start creating a mutual understanding of the major issues facing labour movements around the globe today. The establishment of grassroots contacts and the building of spaces for solidarity is essential for this goal.



Globalisation has increased structural similarities and interdependencies of working conditions worldwide. Set against the background of these developments, the programme "Forum Worlds of Labour - China and Germany" aims at spelling out commonalities and differences between the Chinese and the German working class, in order to eventually join strategies and forces. Regarding the working class in China, major point of concern is the situation of the migrant workers who have moved to the cities in search of wage work from the rural areas as a result of very poor conditions and lack of perspectives as farmers. Their number is an estimated 240 million. They are working in various industries such as production or transport. Jobs are hard to find these days. Furthermore, the hukou system functions as an actual barrier against the protection of migrant workers' civil rights. After years of work in the cities, they are still considered strangers. Residents' rights such as official employment contracts including appropriate social insurance, health insurance, or education of their children, are denied to them. Several local NGO are fighting for the rights of migrant workers. Some include cultural and support centres with facilities for documentation of migrant workers' lives and education classes for workers themselves and for their children, some offer free phone consultations concerning health issues, sanitary issues of factory and dormitory premises, or workers' trainings concerning

awareness of their actual rights and concrete strategies of union organising. As in Germany, workers are gravely affected by the current global crisis – and by employers' reactions to it. In South China, most migrant workers are working in the export oriented industries which suffer most. They have recently experienced plant closures and layoffs. Working conditions and wages are under pressure. Many workers are forced to work overtime, many are never being paid their wages. All workers – migrant and resident – suffer from these conditions, but migrant workers are more vulnerable – and less likely to be able to oppose the deterioration of their working and living conditions. Summarising what was discussed in the exchange meeting, these problems cannot be solved by official trade unions alone. It is crucial to develop new forms of organising. As first steps, a multilingual bulletin board (Chinese, English, German) will be established and Globalization Monitor in cooperation with TIE Germany and Asienstiftung will organise an exchange of German retail workers with Chinese textile and garment industry workers in South China in late 2009. Next common steps for 2010 include an exhibition on the situation of Chinese migrant workers in Berlin as well as exchanges on organising strategies for workers on health and safety issues, and possibly a conference on grassroots experiences with labour law in China and Germany. A joint campaign at the World Social Forum in Senegal 2011 is envisaged.