Shunda Trade Union Election

Report from a production line worker

12 October 2007

Registration for candidates for the union election took place from 1 to 5 September. The registration of candidates was done by factory shop floor. Eligibility criteria: at least six months of service; over 18 years old; senior high school educational level; enthusiasm for trade union work; willingness to work for the broad masses of employees (except for those who have broken the law or practice falungong). After this, divisions in each factory workshop elect their candidates to sit on the trade union election committee. Because the factory increased the subsidy for union committee members from 100 RMB to 200 RMB per month, many enthusiastically registered, and not a few of them are basic level cadres.

At the time of the election, the whole factory was divided into nine electoral sections each of which held its own forum in one evening at the canteen. Between 24 September and 11 October, each candidate presented a speech of two minutes to their constituencies, followed by a question and answer period. On 5 October at 5:30pm I watched the speeches and discussions in electoral Section six, and then on 8 October the forum held by Section seven. In both electoral sections the majority of workers came to watch. The candidates spoke exuberantly, making loud promises that if they became a union committee member they would do everything they could to serve workers’ interests. The workers got so enthused that every time they broke out in applause.

In the Section six meeting I casually asked a female deputy section manager why was it that initially 21 people signed up for the election, but in the end only ten got up onto the stage. She smiled and said that because the two section managers were running, the other front-line production workers were cowed by the authority of their superiors and have withdrawn their candidacies. Another reason was that they themselves knew that they had no hope of competing against their superiors, and so did not take part in the speeches.

Section seven is the spraying department of the sole assembly work shop. 26 people registered to take part. In the end 19 people went on stage to speak. I heard a cadre who was in charge of keeping order in the meeting say to several workers, “In this re-election we will only change committee members. The current chair, vice-chair and full-
time union cadres will not change”. I budged in and asked, “Since this is a re-election, shouldn’t the chair, vice-chair and other cadres be elected by fair and legal means?” He said this is the company’s decision and that surely you can guess the reason.

At 6:30pm after the speeches finished, I spoke to a fellow who was walking next to me making our way to the exit. From the way he talked and dressed he was probably a middle-level cadre or office worker with a high level of education. He shared his opinion with me, saying that perhaps the reason they weren’t having an election for the union chair was that the incumbent union chair is loyal to the company’s interests. There is an unsaid agreement that the performance of his union duties adjusts to the company’s wishes. Over the past five years he has built up a good relationship with the top company managers. It will be a hassle for management if the new chair does not work in synchrony with the company. If the current chair lost the election he might have to go back to be a production line worker. This will be very difficult for him to accept. Actually most workers don’t know if there is a “union” or not, and they don’t care who the chair or cadres are. Workers participate in the election because they simply mechanically do what the company tells them to do. The public forums of Section eight and Section nine were basically the same.

In the two days before the formal voting, workers had this as a topic for discussion during and after work. Everywhere from the factory floor and in the canteen we could hear people discussing the election. They were all saying that all those running were management cadres, that they were just doing it for the 200 RMB subsidy. Occasionally I also heard some workers trying to pull in votes for their cadres.

On 12 October in XX shop floor, the one where I work, a women worker told her colleagues to vote for No. 4444 or No.5555 because, she said, they were section managers. One other female worker was even distributing a propaganda leaflet of “Number 4444” telling people to vote for this number. I got hold of one leaflet and asked her why I should vote for No. 4444. She said he is our Section head, so in future he will take special care of us. What a joke!

At 1.30pm the voting began. Voters of each electoral section were only allowed to vote for the candidates in their own sections. Workers in my workshop lined up to go to vote. Some cadres instructed the workers to vote for No. 4444 or No. 5555. The group leaders led their workers to go to the table to press their thumb prints and then to collect their ballots. I asked around and learned that it was the same in the other sections—cadres telling workers to vote for this or that number. In each section there were section heads running. In each section those who got the most votes would become that section’s trade union committee representative. For Sections one to six, there were three seats each; for Sections seven and eight there were four seats each. In Section nine, the section of top managers, there were two seats.

At 9am on 14 October the upper level trade union leadership cadres, the client’s (Adidas’) representatives, factory leadership and members of the various electoral sections gathered to watch the tallying of the ballots—emptying the ballot boxes, reading
them out and tallying. Because it was Sunday only about 300 workers came. In these few days they were all eager to know the election results. But really, in an election in which Section heads and cadres participate in running, what kind of trade union will it be? Can this union represent workers?

After lunch I went over to the factory bulletin board to have a look as I normally do. Even before I got there I saw a big group of workers surrounding a big red poster elbowing others to have a better look. It turns out that it was a list of names of the various trade union sub-committees. They were discussing among themselves, “How come the number of votes is not released? How come the chair, the deputy chair and the paid union staff are still the same three people? How can this be called an election for a new term of office? If so, why not just appoint them? It is a waste of time to ask us to vote.” One co-worker said that several of the committee members are Section heads of his electoral section. “At normal times Section heads suppressed us and made us do voluntary overtime. If they pay me less than I should get that month and I go to him as my union committee representative, what’s the use? All he’ll do is to make life even more miserable for me.” One worker got so emotional about this that he wanted to tear down the poster. Fortunately his friends pulled him away. He yelled, “All the union knows is to deduct union fees! What’s the use of this kind of union?” When I saw those disappointed faces, I walked away helpless. Yeah, this kind of union is useless. Workers have to be able to choose their own representatives before the union can be of use.