

A strike of 'unorganised' workers in a Chinese car factory: the Nanhai Honda events of 2010

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## 1 Introduction

In going on strike at a transmission factory, workers here have Honda by the jugular [vein], although it was not entirely clear at the employees' dormitory ... that they realized this. Transmission factories are the most expensive auto plants of all to build ... The factory here supplies four Honda plants in China, all of which have been shut down. (*New York Times*, 28 May 2010)

The interdependent nature of factories in the car industry, exacerbated by local and global just-in-time supply practices, can make companies peculiarly vulnerable to stoppages in one factory. In May and June 2010 this was illustrated by the series of strikes, for large pay increases, in the Chinese factories of the Japanese multinational company Honda (particularly that in the Nanhai district of Foshan city, Guangdong province, 100 miles north-west of Hong Kong); these were followed by strikes at Toyota-affiliated factories in China. When the Nanhai Honda strike

created shortages of gearboxes, leading to the shutdown of all Honda's four Chinese assembly factories, news of it even reached *The Times* (28 May 2010) and the *Economist* (3 June 2010) in Britain. For two days the Chinese authorities, playing on anti-Japanese sentiment, unusually allowed domestic news coverage of the strike, thus ensuring its notoriety within China itself. The method of ending the strike by a negotiated settlement with the workforce, and the string of copycat actions that its success generated, has triggered a steady stream of academic comment (e.g., Chang, 2010; Hui, 2011; Lau, 2012; Friedman, 2012, 2013; Chan and Hui, 2012, 2014; Chang and Brown, 2013; Gray and Jang, 2014).

Multinational companies are not allowed to assemble cars or manufacture components in China, except through joint venture partnerships with domestic firms. In 1983, when the first joint venture opened, only 5,200 passenger cars were produced in China. This had grown to 220,000 by 1993 and to 2.3 million in 2004 (Chin, 2010: 4). With China's accession to the World Trade Organization in December 2001, 'production skyrocketed' (Anderson, 2012: 15) as protectionist measures were gradually reduced and prices fell. Its annual car production overtook Japan's in 2009 to become the largest in the world and the industry has carried on growing at a phenomenal rate. In 2010 Chinese factories produced 13.9 million cars, which had risen to 18.1 million three years later (OICA). All the big automobile multinationals now have a presence in China, with Honda setting up joint venture assembly companies in 1998 and 2003 (Anderson, 2012: 268). The Nanhai Honda component factory (a joint venture established in 2007) operated a three-shift system and employed a preponderantly young migrant workforce of about 1,800 (90% male in 2011), the majority (different sources give different percentages) of whom were interns (average age 18), third-year students from technical colleges, recruited every year, and paid a lower wage than regular workers. The strike was an on-off affair, with varying

proportions of the workforce involved. A limited stoppage on 17 May 2010 was followed by a partial strike on 20–21 May, no overtime (to make up for lost production) worked on the weekend of 22–23 May, effectively a full strike between 24 May and 1 June, then a resumption of work until final negotiations on 4 June were accompanied by a small stoppage. After establishing a suitable framework with which to analyse the strike, the rest of the article charts its course.

## 2 Theory, context and method

While the number of strikes is historically extremely low in Europe and North America, strikes in the new ‘workshop of the world’ – China – are becoming more common (van der Velden *et al.*, 2007; Chan, 2009; China Labour Bulletin, 2014; Elfstrom and Kuruvilla, 2014). Even before the increased marketisation of the Chinese economy, strikes were not unknown. Since the early 1980s there has been a spate of ‘mass incidents’ recorded, though the term ‘strike’ often encompassed actions by workers *after* they had lost their jobs. Such incidents included blocking highways and besieging local government buildings, particularly when workers were laid off from state-owned enterprises (Lee, 2000: 43, 48–53; Chan, 2010: 24–42; Pringle, 2011: 77–81). Labour shortages and greater experience of the factory system led to a ‘normalization’ of strikes in the 2000s, and ‘strikes and picket lines have gradually replaced sit-ins and marches’ (Pringle, 2011: 103).

Pringle (2011: 103–4) has used Hobsbawm’s term ‘collective bargaining by riot’ (1964: 7) to describe the ‘short strikes and protests [that] have become an extremely prompt and effective way of redressing ... grievances’ in China, where workers have ‘developed a very good

idea of what they can get away with and how far they can go'. Chan and Hui have taken this further and identify 'collective bargaining by riot' as a transition between 'collective consultation as a formality' and 'party state-led collective bargaining' (2014: 222). The latter authors specifically cite the Honda strike as 'perfectly' exemplifying 'how the collective defiance of Chinese workers has forced management to ... the negotiation table, a situation similar to Hobsbawm's idea'.

This use of Hobsbawm's term 'collective bargaining by riot' is inventive but not appropriate. Hobsbawm employed the term to describe how some groups of (mainly eighteenth-century) British workers used wrecking or burning of machinery as the most effective method available to them at the time to put pressure on employers. 'Riot' encompassed a 'whole complex of activities' in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It often succeeded in achieving an acceptable outcome in an era *before* national trade unions and at a point where any form of direct bargaining was generally impossible in Britain (Hobsbawm, 1964: 7–10, 16–17). In other words, 'collective bargaining by riot' was an early substitute for what eventually became collective bargaining *without* riot. Chan and Hui are actually describing relatively peaceful strikes, usually (as at Nanhai Honda) confined to a single workplace, unlike Hobsbawm's riots which usually embraced several employers and involved local communities. In consequence, Friedman and Lee (2010: 521) have observed that protest in China 'is still fundamentally cellular in nature in the sense that the "cells" are not combining to form "tissues".' But the second generation of migrant workers 'has refused to remain quiet' (Pun and Lu, 2010: 499) and migrants are becoming increasingly 'better informed' and open to 'nonviolent protest activity' as they develop informal 'urban ties' among themselves (Becker, 2012: 1381–1382).

Interest, by academics and activists alike, in the Nanhai Honda strike has focused on the role of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), how its workplace unions can be made more representative, and the prospects for collective bargaining in China. While acknowledging the constraints on industrial action in China, most commentators have treated the Nanhai Honda strike as relatively unproblematic. Yet the development of the strike was far from straightforward as it ebbed and flowed, with changing levels of involvement by the workforce. By drawing on relevant texts within the academic literature on strikes – an approach not taken to date – its various stages and features can be charted. The starting point is to clarify the status of the strike.

Unions that are financially, organisationally, and ideologically ‘independent’ of employers, and of the Communist Party and the Chinese state, are banned in China while the ACFTU, and its constituent parts, has a clear anti-strike stance. Some commentators have even suggested that the ACFTU is not even a trade union (Taylor and Li, 2007). Martin (1989: 145) categorised the Chinese trade-union movement as of the ‘state-ancillary’ type in that it consists of a single confederation, ‘ultimately subject ... to the control of the ruling political party and/or the state’. Such a confederation and its trade unions ‘tend to display an overriding interest in maintaining and improving production’. With odd exceptions, such movements ‘never officially initiate, or endorse, strike action’ (Martin, 1989: 152–4). This situation has not changed to date (*Financial Times*, 8 April 2014; Lee 2014). The union’s ‘task’, when confronted by strikes, is ‘to defuse the situation’ (Chen, 2010: 105). The Nanhai Honda workplace union had been established in 2008 – but Honda management appointed its officials, who were all management staff, and its chair was the deputy director of the administration department (*China News Weekly* (CNW), 1 June 2010). Most workers were members, as a five-yuan monthly fee gave access to a

300-yuan annual ‘welfare’ card; the union’s other main function was to organise day-trips and entertainment. Using an analogy from Francoist Spain (where independent unions were also prohibited), the Nanhai Honda workplace union was typical in China in being an ‘unrepresentative representation body’ (Amsden, 1972: 117). Friedman (2012: 462) has more recently borrowed Max Weber’s term ‘appropriated representation’ to explain the situation where the ACFTU’s ‘representative claim [to speak for workers] is “appropriated” rather than earned’.

The Honda strike has been described as a ‘wildcat’ (Carter, 2010a; Zhang, 2015: 1): it was not only not supported by the union (‘unofficial’, as we would understand the term in Britain) but actively opposed by it. Yet neither ‘wildcat’ nor ‘unofficial’ is helpful in the Chinese context. Chen (2010: 105) has argued that, because of the ACFTU’s role, ‘workers’ collective action in China is always launched by *unorganized* workers’ (added emphasis) (also see Liu and Li, 2014: 86), so the Honda strike’s status is probably best approached as non-union. While a whole study was once devoted to output restriction by unorganised workers (Mathewson, 1969 [1931]), the extensive Western literature on strikes rarely covers strikes by them unless union recognition is involved. But unorganised workers in China cannot create or join an independent union. So in the country with the world’s largest employed workforce, strikers face problems not currently encountered in other developed industrial economies.

Ross (1954: 24) has indicated that, historically, unorganised strikers in England and the USA ‘were thrown together into an *ad hoc* organization ... which often disappeared when the strike had ended’. Attempts to study the strike process of organised, let alone unorganised, workers are not that common. Karsh’s (1982 [1958]) detailed study of one strike, to secure a union contract, stands out but it is in the work of an even earlier generation (Hiller, 1928) that we

find what is still the most useful account of a ‘processual model of strikes’ (Hartley *et al.*, 1983: 11–12), one that can be used also to analyse strikes of unorganised ‘non-union’ workers. Hiller’s book, a ‘classic study’ (Kelly and Nicholson, 1980: 870), was based on the already substantial literature available at the time, drawing on several countries (particularly the USA and UK) and ranging over a long time period. He noted that ‘every industrial group which begins to organize, repeats, in some respects, the behaviour characteristic of ... early labor movements’ (Hiller, 1928: 72), which should make his observations particularly relevant to the Chinese workers’ situation of today.

Hiller (1928: 10) identified a number of separate processes in a strike: organisation, mobilisation, maintaining group morale, controlling strikebreakers, neutralising the employer’s manoeuvres, manipulating ‘public opinion’, and demobilisation. The introduction to Hiller’s book (1928: ix) suggested that he saw in strikes ‘a cycle of typical events which take place in a more or less regular and predictable way’, and Hiller himself (1928: 10) referred to ‘successive phases of the strike cycle’. But the various strike processes identified by Hiller do not all necessarily occur in a fixed order and often overlap in practice. Yet they do provide a particularly helpful framework for understanding non-union strikes and will be used to structure an account of the Nanhai Honda strike. Chen (2010: 122) has suggested that, in China, ‘Without organization and rules to follow for strikes, the behavioural pattern of worker action can be volatile, undisciplined and unpredictable’. But the rest of this article will show that the behaviour of the workers and the employer in the Nanhai Honda strike conform remarkably closely to the pattern of western strikes observed by Hiller nearly a century ago, once the absence of independent unions is allowed for.

Some of the roots of the recent literature on mobilisation (see Kelly, 1998) can be found in Hiller (1928: 49), who described workers 'creating interpretations of the situation which encourage action: supplying justifications for striking and minimizing the hazards'. In their study of a vehicle assembly plant, Batstone *et al.* (1978: 46–62) built on Hiller's notion that workers create a 'rationale' for strikes. They found what they called vocabularies 'in support of' and 'in opposition to' strike action and also 'collectivist and individualistic vocabularies'. They were describing what has been termed 'vocabularies of motive', a concept which found its way into sociology through Mills (1940: 909). Eldridge (1973: 172–181) explicitly referred to 'vocabularies of motive' when discussing industrial conflict and the term has since become a key concept in the literature on 'framing' (Benford and Snow, 2000: 617–618). The rationale for striking for higher wages at Nanhai Honda was initially framed only in the language of injustice. In the course of the strike it then incorporated anti-Japanese sentiment that the authorities had encouraged by allowing the strike's coverage by domestic news media and, then, after an attack by union 'thugs' (Lau, 2012: 505), the strikers also framed their dispute in the language of dignity. By contrast, the Honda management continually framed the workers' action as illegal.

The industry in which a strike occurs has a significant effect on its form. Under Dunlop's (1958) schema, the 'market' and 'technical' contexts of the car industry are similar in all countries with car factories. This similarity has been intensified by the international reach of the limited number of companies in the industry and the competition between them in worldwide markets. Dunlop's 'power context' – the national industrial relations system and the status of the industrial relations actors – varies between countries. The economic impact of car industry strikes shows similarities between countries and over time. The market and technical contexts



would restrict the range of options available to employers in reaction to such strikes; the national power context would constrain or facilitate their access to particular options.

Silver (2003: 92) has emphasised car workers' 'workplace bargaining power', namely the 'disruptive power that continuous flow production puts in the hands of workers'. This has become greater as a result of (local, national and global) just-in-time systems, allowing Silver (2003: 69) to conclude that 'the main sites of automobile industry expansion [particularly China now] still retain the characteristics that provoked and facilitated the historic waves of autoworker militancy, from the CIO struggles of the 1930s' to the current day. This similarity over time and place means that, when analysing the Nanhai Honda strike of 2010, we can compare it with relatively little-known examples of non-union strikes in the early mass-production car industries of the UK and the US in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This makes for more fruitful comparisons than using examples from unionised workforces.

During the depths of the inter-war depression there were 'spontaneous movements among unorganized automobile workers' in Detroit, the heartland of the US industry. A number of strikes in 1933, particularly over wage cuts, led to employers quickly reinstating former wages. The most intractable dispute, of 6,000 workers at four Briggs (car-body) plants, led to important concessions but the strikers wanted further improvements and management recognition of an employee-elected shop committee. The company met an employees' committee but made no further concessions and the strike eventually fizzled out (Fine, 1963: 27–9).

By contrast, there was a successful landmark strike of non-unionists at the Pressed Steel Company car body factory in Oxford, England, in 1934. A stoppage over wages by the night shift in the press shop led some strikers to approach the local Communist Party branch which advised them on how to proceed. The strikers leafleted the day shift and persuaded their own

department to cease work. They then marched through the factory, persuading others to stop, if only temporarily. Over the next few day and night shifts other groups decided to join the strike (sometimes because their work was running out – as would happen at Nanhai Honda). By now union recognition had been added to the list of demands. The management then shut the factory for several days. Mass picketing greeted the reopening of the factory and, although some workers returned, key workers did not. The company, under pressure for production from its customers (car-assembly factories – similar to the Nanhai Honda situation), settled within three days of its attempted restart and agreed to recognise unions (Lyddon, 1987: 635–8, 764–6; Lyddon, 1993).

The Nanhai Honda dispute was a textbook example of a ‘stay-in’ strike (Knowles, 1952: 10–11). This tactic is different from an occupation strike, popularised by those at several General Motors factories in Flint, Michigan, in 1936–37; these factory occupations were referred to, at the time, as ‘sit-downs’, but this term also encompassed short strikes during a shift. In a stay-in strike, workers find it easier to maintain their unity and solidarity by remaining *inside* the plant during working hours, rather than risking exposing their weakness by picketing from outside. To avoid civil unrest, the Chinese authorities did not want the Honda strikers outside the factory, and this inadvertently strengthened the strikers’ position.

One British example of the stay-in strike comes from the Austin, Birmingham, car factory in 1929. Here, in a dispute over a wage reduction, the mainly non-union workforce clocked in on a Monday but, according to the Engineering Employers’ Federation, they ‘did not start work but walked about, smoked, played cards, idled and ... then verbally announced that they were on strike’. The company countered that it would shut the factory for a week if work was not resumed on the Wednesday. When the factory re-opened, workers clocked in but most again refused to work. The company then required them to obtain a permit from their foremen in

order to get work the next day or they would be considered to have discharged themselves. The strike committee abandoned the ‘stay-in’ tactic and decided to picket from outside but strikers were thwarted by the police (Lyddon, 1987: 648–50).

Such historical examples of strikes of unorganised carworkers facilitate a greater understanding of some of the features of the Nanhai Honda strike. An account of this strike can be pieced together from contemporary (mainly American and Chinese) newspapers and pro-labour outlets such as the *China Labour Bulletin* and IHLO (Hong Kong Liaison office of the ICFTU/GUF) reports. There is also a secondary literature (sometimes using interview evidence from strike participants). One of the authors was present at the final negotiations on 4 June 2010, as an assistant to Professor Chang Kai, the strikers’ legal adviser. A purposive sampling method was used to select twenty-one workers, spread across the different production departments of the factory, who were willing to talk about their experiences of the strike. They were interviewed between October 2010 and July 2012; quotes from eight of them are cited here (numbered 1–8). Some union officials were also interviewed but it was hard to contact, let alone to interview, any management staff. All interviewees’ identities remain anonymous. The strike was sufficiently long (nearly three weeks from the first stoppage to the final settlement) and well reported, to provide enough information to analyse it satisfactorily using Hiller’s categories.

### 3 The strike

A number of factors fed into Nanhai Honda workers’ dissatisfaction with their wages: staff brought in from Japan were earning ‘about 50 times what local Chinese workers receive’ (*New York Times*, 2 June 2010); regular staff were paid significantly less than at Honda’s Chinese

assembly factories; interns earned less than regular workers; wages were far below the industrial average (China Labour Bulletin, 2012: 6, fig. 2) and in sharp contrast to Honda's profitability; finally, in April 2010, Honda did not match the increase in the local minimum wage. Dissatisfied workers asked for a pay rise, but the management ignored their mounting discontent.

### 3.1 Preliminary organisation and mobilisation

Before the strike can occur, a group capable of concerted action must be formed. (Hiller, 1928: 25)

'Even a spontaneous strike has to be started by somebody' (quoted in Hiller, 1928: 61).

No workforce exists in isolation from the rest of society and there will always be workers who are aware, to however limited an extent, that the strike weapon could be used in their own situation. That applied in the China of the early twenty-first century despite there being no organisations that workers could join or create in order to mobilise for such a strike. From personal contacts but mostly from electronic media, many workers would know that strikes happen in China and over what issues. Even in Honda, for example, there had been two-day strikes, for a pay rise, in two component factories in 2006 and 2007 (*South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, 30 May 2010). Our interview evidence suggests that, at Nanhai Honda, workers in 2008 and 2009 had discussed strikes as a way to improve their low wages. One source claims there were four strikes in 2009 and nine strikes between January and March 2010 in affiliated companies and suppliers of Honda in Guangdong province's auto parts hubs of Guangzhou,

Foshan and Zhongshan cities (IHLO, 2010: 18–19); some Nanhai Honda workers may have been aware of one or more of these.

There were many strands feeding into the decision to strike. One source suggests that two of the more experienced workers sought out Lao Zhang,<sup>1</sup> ‘a citizen representative who had specifically represented workers in legal cases’. Lao Zhang suggested using a mediation procedure and that if the two handed out a leaflet in preparation for a strike this would give some bargaining leverage (Wang, 2011: 13–14). But for a strike to take place, some secret planning would be required: ‘The strategic value of secrecy ... [is] that it averts a counter-move, such as discharge and intimidation’ (Hiller, 1928: 133). The strike instigators also had to be confident that enough workers would be prepared to join in to avoid the leaders being dismissed immediately the strike started; so, as well as a ‘small but critical mass’ (Kelly, 1998: 127) persuading others to take the initial action, there also had to be a sufficient ‘critical mass’ of strikers to make the action effective and to push the managers on to the defensive.

Like Hiller, Hyman (1989: 111) among others has argued that ‘collective action by workers is impossible without some degree of leadership and organisation’. But the shop-floor leadership shown by workers standing up to supervisors or managers, as in Fantasia’s (1988: 84–85) American example, is not possible in the Chinese situation – hence the need to organise outside the workplace. It seems that 23-year-old Tan Guocheng (who had worked at Honda for two and a half years) could only persuade others to join him if he took the lead himself. According to him, there were only ‘random talks on the shuttle bus to work’ until a week before the 17 May stoppage when fifteen workers from Tan’s workshop met one night to discuss the plan. *China News Weekly* (2 June 2010) suggested eventually twenty workers were involved in preparing for the strike. Tan had handed in his resignation notice on 29 April, as had 20-year-old

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym.

Xiao Lang, from another production line, who agreed to help to lead the strike, so both felt they had nothing to lose. Xiao also created an internet chat room on QQ (a Chinese instant messaging software service) the night before the strike started.

As Hiller (1928: 66) notes: simple examples of ‘tactics used in beginning strikes ... are those which are arranged to occur at a given signal, such as waving an emblem, blowing a whistle, giving a secret sign’. Where there are moving assembly lines, there is an obvious device, so, early during their morning shift on Monday 17 May, Tan and Xiao pressed their nearest emergency buttons (*International Herald Tribune (IHT)*, 15 June 2000; *New York Times*, 17 June 2000). A siren sounded and the two workers called out: ‘Don’t work for such low wages!’ They were unable to get workers from other shops in the factory to join them. The fifty or so strikers<sup>2</sup> stuck to their original plan, ‘to stage a silent demonstration on the [factory] basketball court’. News spread of the stoppage and the absence of the striking workers led to the production line eventually stopping: ‘the majority of the workforce had been passively sucked into the strike, although they still stood by their production lines’. By lunchtime there were about 100 strikers (*CNW*, 2 June 2010) and, later, possibly a maximum of 150 from across the factory on that shift (*ILHO*, 2010), some of the others being apprehensive about the consequences of taking action.

At noon the strikers went to the dining hall and found a company notice for them to write suggestions on six white notice boards, which they did. After their demands had been translated into Japanese the managers promised to respond by Friday 21 May, four days later. At 3.00 pm the afternoon shift started work as normal (*CNW*, 2 June 2010). Although it was later suggested that the strike ‘evolved into an essentially “leaderless” movement, coordinated mainly via text messages sent on mobile phones’ (*Straits Times* (Singapore), 10 June 2010), the strikers seemed to be organised in different departments by a number of

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<sup>2</sup> *IHT*, 2 June 2010, suggests only twenty workers initially struck.

workers who had sufficient courage or confidence and fellow workers' trust. Despite production resuming, 'many workers claimed that productivity dropped', with an axle worker indicating that they were polishing only half the normal number. For the first negotiations, on Thursday 20 and Friday 21 May, two representatives were elected – by show of hands or popular acclaim – from each of the five main production divisions. One source suggests they were accompanied by some team leaders. The only role of the workplace union was 'to provide a platform of communication between the two sides' of management and strikers (CNW, 2 June 2010).

Interview evidence indicates that, when workers heard that the management had 'not seriously' considered their request for a large wage increase, they 'were so angry' (interview 1) that the strike was called again just like 'a hundred responses to a single call' (interview 2). A partial strike started at 8.00 pm on the evening of Thursday 20 May, followed by disruption most of Friday, though the company suggested that the strike only restarted on the evening of Friday 21 May instead (IHLO, 2010). The company and the union agreed to give their answer on Monday 24 May. The workplace union chair's immediate role was to remonstrate with strikers to return to work, and he was in 'close communication' with the factory manager during the meeting with workers' representatives on 24 May (Chan and Hui, 2014: 229). During the strike he 'tailed the general manager everywhere *as if he was the manager's bodyguard*' (Lau, 2012: 505; added emphasis).

Most retrospective accounts suggest that the original and continuing wage demand was for an extra 800 yuan a month (on top of the existing wage of about 1,500 yuan for regular workers), but this goes against the experience that 'In most spontaneous strikes ... the aims are defined after work has been suspended' (Hiller, 1928: 80, n.1). One source suggests the workers

had initially asked for a 200–400 yuan rise (*China Labour Bulletin*, 15 September 2010), another that it was 500 yuan (*The Times*, 28 May 2010). A Nanhai Honda worker later explained: ‘After production stopped, ... Japanese companies ... were all increasing salaries by 300 or 400, 500 yuan, so everyone said, that’s no good, we are on strike ... so since everyone else’s demands are going up, we want 800 yuan from them’ (*China Labour Bulletin*, 15 September 2010). This demand, 800 yuan for all workers, was not made until 27 May and was designed to counter the differential offers the management were making to regular workers and interns (*Support Statement*, 3 June 2010).

Workers were asked to report for overtime over the first weekend to make up for production lost that week. Strike leader Tan countered this by renewing the call for striking but it was later announced through loudspeakers on Saturday 22 May that he and the other strike initiator, Xiao, were dismissed – one week earlier than their official leaving date. This was intended to decapitate and intimidate the leadership of the strike but it seems to have rebounded on management by actually increasing support for the strike. On the Sunday, 23 May, with managers taking photographs of strikers, the latter put on surgical masks. The next day managers tried to stop a workers’ demonstration around the factory yard by pushing them back to their workshops. Japanese and Chinese managers took pictures of the strikers. ‘We took pictures of them too by mobile phones. We tried to stop them and run to them, but they shouted “you come here!” ... Then we had our face masks on because we feared our faces being identified in the photos’ (interview 3).

‘Managers tried to separate us by locking us in different rooms. The security guards couldn’t help but only told us not to destroy anything’ (interview 2). Strikers called for more workers to join in their demonstration:



There were many student trainees, just recruited from schools, who were inside a training room. We shouted to them ... They were brain-washed by the company in those meetings, although many of them didn't want to be there. As a result, some of them also came out to be with us ... We walked all over the place including the basketball courts, sometimes sitting on the ground. Sometimes the security guards came to us and whispered to us privately: 'your strike is good, go on'. (interview 2).

The strike continued through the week. Honda shut its two assembly plants in Guangdong province on 24 May and its two in Hubei province on 26 May. It was reported that Honda's CEO, Takanobu Ito, even flew in to find a solution (*China Auto Web*, 29 May 2010). On Wednesday 26 May, 'Management wanted to constrain us inside the workshops by doing a register but we eventually went out to the courtyard after 3.00 pm' (interview 3). 'They locked in some colleagues to prevent them from going outside. It was like private custody' (interview 2). During the evening of Thursday 27 May, a lawyer came into the factory yard to meet the strikers, saying 'he'd like to help ... claiming he wasn't from the Japanese side and he was sent by a union organisation ... He said he wanted to be one of our strike team'. He then said 'not to strike because it was "illegal". His point was to stop us'. He spoke on his mobile phone in Japanese: 'We didn't know what he was talking about, but we did know he wasn't trustful. I asked: "show your ID card to see whether you are Japanese or Chinese" ... Then he took out a lawyer's certificate before he went away' (interview 2).

The argument that the strike was illegal was to be used again by the company but the current law in China 'neither explicitly provides ... nor forbids' the right to strike (Chang, 2013:

136), so the Honda strike was not illegal – and the strikers were not intimidated by any threats to the contrary.

### 3.2 Maintaining morale and unity

Parades, demonstrations, and assemblies have been features of the strike since its earliest beginnings. Marching, with its unison of action, is admirably designed to create *rapport*. Singing, concerted derision, and applause ... develop consensus ... Without them no strike, *particularly one by inexperienced persons*, can be maintained long ... Rallying calls, embodied in oratory, poetry, and song, steel the will to carry on ... Morale is aided by appropriating patriotic and other sentiments and tying them to the strike (added emphasis; Hiller, 1928: 84, 89, 91).

Unusually, almost all the events of the strike unfolded inside the factory gates, so any parades were not public but were visible to any reporters at the factory gates (from about 27 May) and transmissible by the strikers through social media. When, on 24 May, the company had conceded some minor changes to remuneration which did not affect aggregate pay, this apparently brought out the whole workforce (interns and regular workers), chanting ‘fight to the end’ (ILHO, 2010). Over the next week the strikers regularly marched around the factory yard, chanting slogans, such as ‘we need a pay rise’, or sang the national anthem (an example of Hiller’s ‘patriotic’ sentiments) and ‘Unity Is Power’, a popular song in the Maoist era. When a number of the strikers felt bored from marching, some wrote new slogans in the dining room and took these out to the rest of the group (interview 4). More generally, they used mobile phone calls, text

messages and internet online chat-rooms to communicate news to each other. A local online forum, Tiantianxin, was used to post messages as it was convenient and relatively secure, and ‘we could only rely on the internet, no other way’ (interview 5). Another online community, the QQ group, attracted most strikers because it ‘looked quite confidential during the strike’ (interview 6).

In the QQ group some of us called each other as comrade, and recited [founder of the Chinese Nationalist Party] Sun Yet Sen’s famous phrase before his death, ‘The revolution is yet to be successful, and comrades must continue their diligence’ ... We have been influenced by these revolutionary thoughts since we were young, and we also used anti-Japanese slogans borrowed from the war era to inspire each other to fight against the Japanese management. (interview 4)

Anti-Japanese sentiment does not seem to have been a factor in the initial mobilisation for the strike but became an important way of framing opposition to the company as the strike developed.

A guard told an American reporter that workers had been sitting on a double basketball court just inside the factory gate ‘for several hours each morning’ (*IHT*, 29 May 2010). At times they felt frustrated waiting for management’s reaction to their developing demands. ‘After all day marching and waiting without a clear outcome, we did ... things to pass the time, sleeping, playing cards [as in the 1929 Austin strike] or mobile phones, but overall we were exhausted’ (interview 1). Their sense of solidarity developed along with the use of these communications. They also discussed their tactics when they stayed inside the factory yard or went back to their

dormitories where the mainly young unmarried men could sit together and register their resistance; in this case the dormitory system was not an instrument of company control (see Smith and Pun, 2006). The large number of interns had their own existing networks from college and this facilitated their level of participation in the strike.

One report suggested that, with so many young Chinese going to university and the low birth rate, there was a shortage of young people available for factory work, giving them some leverage (*New York Times*, 30 May 2010; more generally, also see Elfstrom and Kuruvilla, 2014: 459–460). In line with this, a full-time worker told the *SCMP* (30 May 2010): ‘We are young and fearless because we have no family or economic responsibilities’.

### 3.3 Controlling strikebreakers and neutralising the employers’ manoeuvres

Monday morning is a critical time, for employers then make special efforts to break the strikers’ resistance (Hiller, 1928: 94).

Although the authorities had allowed some domestic reporting of the strike, the company’s tactic of shutting workers in during their shift times avoided the strikers demonstrating in public. As the *Economist* (3 June 2010) reported, there was ‘no picketing, no clashes with police’. General Chinese hostility towards Japan ‘had made it harder to send in the police to break up strikes on behalf of Japanese managers’ (*New York Times*, 28 May 2010). This worked to the strikers’ advantage because their stay-in strike meant that they could effectively disrupt production inside the plant, without the need to expose publicly any weakness, such as non-strikers crossing picket lines. It made it easier to maintain their unity and morale, as they formed an even closer

community in the factory than in their scattered dormitories in different locations. Warner and Low (1947: 37) have shown how strikers going into a strike-hit factory to ‘work’ can talk non-strikers out of continuing to work. In effect, the Nanhai Honda managers gave this facility to their own strikers, who were able more easily to persuade groups of workers to join them when the company periodically tried to break the strike. The *Financial Times* (11 June 2010) also suggested that, compared to many giant Chinese factories, the size of the Nanhai Honda workforce ‘made it relatively easy for staff to organise outside’ the official union.

The company believed that the easiest way to break the strike was by threatening the interns. In the third and last year of their study, these vocational college students were placed in the company for on-the-job training – but they found themselves ‘doing repetitive and low-skilled work on the production line irrelevant to their learning in schools’. In the words of some Honda interns: ‘We agree absolutely this is a high-class looking sweatshop. The biggest pity is that we are buried here. We have learned nothing. The so-called training – it is something that anybody can learn and become proficient in it by spending a day or two on the production line’ (IHLO, 2010: 13). With such resentment against the company not uncommon, not enough interns were prepared to be cowed.

Most sources suggest that an ‘Agreement to Internship’ was sent out on 27 May which authorised the company and the different vocational schools to terminate internships and college courses should interns ‘take the lead or participate in work-to-rule, and work stoppages’ (ILHO, 2010: Appendix One). The principals of the affected colleges were summoned to meet their own student interns on Saturday 29 May. Most of these meetings broke up with no resolution and some students even walked out of them (CNW, 2 June 2010). Interns were told to sign the letters by 31 May (SCMP, 30 May 2010). ‘The workers’ defiance was written in red ink. “If you are

Chinese you will definitely not sign – one for all and all for one,” a striking Honda employee wrote’ on his form (*Financial Times*, 1 June 2010). This statement weaved together patriotic and anti-Japanese sentiments along with worker solidarity.

Perhaps sensing that threatening interns would not be sufficient to end the strike – though some did resume on Monday 31 May (Open Letter, 3 June 2010) – the company resorted to another tactic. On that same day, it allowed up to 200 men wearing union yellow caps, to march through the gates into the factory yard.<sup>3</sup> These so-called union staff tried to force strikers back to their work stations and some videoed the strikers, who then attempted to snatch the cameras, resulting in several strikers being roughed up in the general mêlée. One worker shouted: ‘We pay union dues every month. You should represent us, so how come you are beating us?’ Another said, ‘You’re not listening to the Chinese, but you’re listening to the Japanese’ (*SCMP*, 1 June 2010). ‘We wanted to tell the media but most [domestic] news channels were blocked and nobody came to report that incident [see below]. So we posted pictures of the clash online directly’ (interview 4). By disseminating evidence of this online to other Honda workers in the factory and in their dormitories, as well as to outsiders following the dispute, the strikers had turned this clash into the equivalent of one of those ‘dramatic public events that seem to cry out for an expressive response’ (Rule, 1989: 154).

As a result of the attack, several hundred workers who had returned to work stopped again and gathered on the basketball court. ‘Special police in steel helmets [then] set up a ... cordon in front of the factory’s main gate’ (*CNW*, 2 June 2010). This sent ‘a clear message ... that the government considered it to be a labour dispute, to be resolved within the factory’ (*China Labour Bulletin*, 2012: 20). In the afternoon, ‘police cordoned off the roads to the factory

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<sup>3</sup> *CNW*, 1 June 2010 (this date is wrong), states they had work cards hanging on their chests, saying ‘Shishan Union’. ‘According to a cleaner at Nanhai Honda, most are unemployed youth from surrounding villages.’

and turned back busloads of workers who were on their way to start their afternoon shift' (*SCMP*, 1 June 2010). At one dormitory, a company representative told interns not to go to work on Tuesday 1 June in case there was a repeat of Monday's events;<sup>4</sup> some interns had not yet signed the contract because of these events (*Reuters*, 1 June 2010). One 23-year-old said after the attack, 'Now it's not a matter of pay rises, but upholding our dignity' (*SCMP*, 1 June 2010).

On Tuesday 1 June, 100–200 workers inside the factory went to the gate to appeal to foreign reporters about the previous day's events (*Reuters*, 1 June 2010). When stoppages took place, one of the code-words was 'factory stroll';<sup>5</sup> on this Tuesday, one message read 'Today we are out on a stroll again' (*Straits Times* (Singapore), 10 June 2010). That day, Zeng Qinghong, general manager of Guangzhou Automobile Group (a joint venture with Honda) and also a National People's Congress delegate, came to the factory compound to talk to the strikers. At first he was abused, but he claimed he was there in his political, not managerial, capacity. The strikers had more demands: no dismissal of strikers; a higher pay rise; an explanation from the union for its behaviour; and reorganisation of the Nanhai Honda workplace union.

At a meeting with worker representatives Zeng Qinghong required the local union to apologise in writing by 5.00 pm that day and went to the cafeteria with the worker representatives to address 300–400 workers, saying the company would respond to workers' demands within three days. On that basis the strikers agreed to return for three days. The Nanhai District Trade Union and Shishan Township Union duly issued a partial 'apology' to the Honda workers; this was posted all over the factory:

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<sup>4</sup> *Financial Times* (31 May 2010) reported that 'shifts have been suspended as negotiations between worker representatives, Honda and government mediators continued'.

<sup>5</sup> Béja (2011: 4) uses the term 'collective walk'.

In the process of dialogue with more than 40 employees ... there occurred mutual misunderstandings and words exchanged ... A few exceptional employees became agitated and physical altercations occurred with union staff ... [A]fter receiving this news some workers misunderstood and believed that the union was biased towards the company ... If there are some aspects of the incident that anyone finds hard to accept, then we express our apology ... The union stepping forward and urging those employees to go back to work was really for the protection of the majority of employees. This is the union's ultimate duty! Each employee, please consider that! ... Everyone, please trust the union. Trust cadres and the government at each level. We will definitely uphold justice.<sup>6</sup> (Open Letter, 1 June 2010)

Standing up to the union and extracting an apology 'set a new benchmark for labour activism in China' (China Labour Bulletin, 2011: 4). The union was badly shaken. Chen Weiguang (chairman of the Guangzhou Federation of Trade Unions) later argued that it was a mistake to issue this letter, especially as when it was posted on the web the union was criticised by 'the whole world'. Rather belatedly, he then tried to dissociate the union from these events by claiming that the individuals involved were 'not trade unionists, but outsiders', who 'had hoped to end the strike quickly by disguising themselves as trade unionists' (*Global Labour Column* 55, April 2011).

### 3.4 Manipulating public opinion, and demobilisation

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<sup>6</sup> This official translation has been slightly modified, after reading the version in Friedman, 2012: 470.



[T]echniques ... [which ‘appeal to various sentiments of outsiders’] used by ... strikers ... [include] ... enduring aggression or wrong without retaliation (Hiller, 1928: 166, 169).

The strikers had apparently agreed two strict rules beforehand, which were a way of framing the way they conducted their action as responsible: ‘Damaging machines or facilities at Honda and scuffling with people with different opinions, including our management, were strictly prohibited ... [W]e are telling the public that we are all well-educated people and our fight is reasonable and rational’ (*SCMP*, 16 June 2010).

Unprecedented media coverage helped to provide support to strikers and pressure on management. The strike had not come to international attention until 27 May when Japanese media began reporting the shutdown of Honda’s Chinese assembly plants. Local authorities then allowed state-controlled Chinese media to report the strike on 27 and 28 May, with reporters (from Beijing, Shanghai and some nearby cities) waiting outside the factory gates, but then banned domestic coverage so Chinese reporters disappeared on 29 May, with the authorities ‘reverting to their usual policy of hushing up labor disputes’ (*New York Times*, 28, 29, 30 May 2010; *IHT* 29 May 2010). It was suggested that exploiting anti-Japanese feeling had made the authorities’ decision to allow Chinese reporting a little easier – an example of the government wanting ‘to indulge nationalist sentiment’ during strikes at some foreign-owned enterprises (Cooke, 2012: 152) – despite concern about the impact of strikes on foreign investment (Chen, 2010: 109). As noted above and below, the strikers took advantage of the continuing international press coverage as well as exploiting the opportunity offered to depict their strike in patriotic language.

‘The QQ group (“Unity is Victory”) and a range of other internet tools allowed workers to provide rolling briefings on progress in the strike, enabling reporters to track events and lawyers and labour rights activists to give professional advice’ (China Labour Bulletin, 2011: 14). The strikers posted photos and video footage online before publishing an open letter on the internet on 3 June (Open Letter, 3 June 2010). Lüthje (2011: 17) claims this ‘unique document’ was ‘widely published in Chinese media and Internet websites’. It referred to the company’s large profit ‘created by the sweat and labour of the workers’ and asked management to ‘provide time off for the worker representatives to have meetings and collect workers’ opinions’; it condemned the local unions, while appealing to all sections of the workforce to elect representatives if they had not already done so; and stated to the general public that ‘We are concerned with the rights and interests of the workers in the whole country’ (Open Letter, 3 June 2010).

That day an international solidarity statement, initiated by the ‘Chinese Workers Research Network’, was also posted on the internet (*Support Statement*), signed by a number of academics (mainly from Hong Kong and Taiwan). Finally, the strikers asked a university professor to act as labour adviser for what became the final negotiations on 4 June. One source suggests that a reporter from *Caijing*, the Chinese business newspaper, told worker representatives he could help them find a lawyer. He then found Professor Chang Kai, of Renmin University in Beijing, who agreed to speak to the reporter first about the outcome of the negotiations (Wang, 2011: 18). Another source says that Li Xiaojuan, one of the worker representatives, called Chang Kai on 3 June; he was impressed that she had found his mobile phone number (*SCMP*, 16 June 2010) but insisted on a formal invitation.

While Zeng Qinghong had been involved in talks with strikers' representatives during the last week of the strike, there was much distrust towards him, especially when he repeated earlier management statements that the strike was illegal. He was also unhappy about the strikers' 'open letter'. Thirty representatives were elected late on the night of 3 June for the next day's negotiations (interview 2). One activist took part in drafting the strikers' letter and then people voted for him (interview 7). Another, a young female worker, Li Xiaojuan, had 'stood up voluntarily so she could represent us from the beginning of the strike as she was very brave' (interview 6). She was welcomed by other women strikers, her courage inspiring them: 'I searched and read a lot of materials during the night before negotiation, though many issues were hard to understand. ... We found out some legal information and then made summaries ... I printed out some copies of the laws, but many other delegates did not bother to read them' (interview 8).

At the final negotiation, on 4 June 2010, the workplace union's chair – in a symbolic role – chaired negotiations, with five or so of the strikers' representatives directly involved. Factory senior managers, including the general manager, took part in the negotiations directly. The workers' labour adviser acted first as conciliator – trying to bring the sides together – and then as mediator, making recommendations to workers to secure a settlement, which included an agreement to re-organise the workplace union. The negotiation split into three sessions. After the first, it was reported that some workers had stopped work due to the lack of progress. Chang Kai thought this was helpful but the workers were persuaded to return. After the second round Chang

Kai argued with the representatives to limit their demand to an overall increase of 500 yuan (a rise of about one-third above the existing wage) – and this was finally agreed by management.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4 Postscript and conclusion

Two quotes emphasise the relationship between the strikers and the workplace union: ‘They have organised this themselves’ said a workplace union official (*Financial Times*, 28 May 2010); and ‘We are doing this ourselves. The [official] union doesn’t represent us’ (*Financial Times*, 1 June 2010). The ‘reorganisation’ of the workplace union over the next two years was convoluted, best described as ‘creating smoke and mirrors through a complicated electoral process’ (Lau, 2012: 511). Even nomination to higher committees within the workplace union required agreement by its executive committee and the factory’s Communist Party branch, resulting in very little change of personnel. Li Xiaojuan, one of the 2010 strikers’ representatives, who *was* elected to the executive committee, quit the factory in August 2011 for further study, and other representatives have also left (Lau, 2012: 505). The workplace union had ‘negotiated’ acceptable wage rises in 2011 and 2012 but the differential increases it agreed in the next wage round led to another strike, this time by 100 production-line workers on 18 March 2013, forcing the company, the next day, to improve the offer for the lowest paid (Cheung, 2013).

Our analysis of the 2010 Nanhai Honda strike has used the framework provided by Hiller (1928) because it is unusual in being able to accommodate ‘unorganised’ strikers and the absence of an independent trade union. Although written in a very different era, Hiller’s model identifies most features of all but short strikes, from preliminary organisation to demobilisation. Far from

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<sup>7</sup> Wang (2011: 19) claims ‘many workers were dissatisfied with the way outsiders had represented them in the negotiations ... So the strike continued from June 5 [a Saturday] until June 8, until the management and workers’ representatives met once more and reached an agreement directly.’

being an example of Hobsbawm's (1964) 'collective bargaining by riot', as suggested by some commentators, the Nanhai Honda strike had very familiar characteristics, found in tens of thousands of relatively peaceful strikes in other countries where strikes were not outlawed. It was also an example of a particular phenomenon – that a 'large-scale strike *can* be triggered by the decisive action of only a small number' (Lane and Roberts, 1971: 225; added emphasis) – and our account traced how such a strike was sustained. Meaningful parallels of non-union strikes were found within the same industry – the most appropriate level of comparison (Dunlop, 1958: 25) – where the 'disruptive power that continuous flow production puts in the hands of workers' in the car industry (Silver, 2003: 92) is potentially immense.

One obvious difference from Hiller's (1928) model was the Nanhai Honda strikers' use of social media (rather than slower more traditional methods) for communication between themselves and within the workforce, and (once the foreign press had taken an interest) to the outside world. It has been suggested that 'it was ... the degree of publicity and support the strike received in the Chinese media that made it [the Nanhai Honda strike] truly remarkable' (Carter, 2010b). That publicity was a result of the strategic position the factory occupied within the giant multinational Honda's supply chain and the Chinese authorities' (temporary) decision to stir up anti-Japanese sentiment. Breathing the oxygen of publicity helped the strikers maintain enough unity when faced with management efforts to break their solidarity. The Honda strikers' use of social media is only a modern example of 'manipulating public opinion' (Hiller, 1928: 10), though its successful exploitation is denied to most groups of strikers, particularly in China.

There is a substantial modern literature on mobilisation (see Kelly, 1998) and framing (Benford and Snow, 2000) but the rudiments of these processes are found in Hiller (1928) and have been built upon in our account of the Nanhai Honda strike. Despite its distance in time and

place, Hiller's 'classic' text, *The Strike: A Study in Collective Action*, still provides a robust framework for analysing a strike of 'unorganised' workers – even in a contemporary Chinese car factory.

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