



## **Preliminary Research Findings Brief**

Post-Socialist Trade Unions, Low Pay and Decent Work: Russia, China and Vietnam

### **Project aims, objectives, methods**

The aim of the project is to identify the possibilities and limits of trade union practice to improve the pay and working conditions of employees in three post-socialist countries, Russia, China and Vietnam. These countries provide very favourable conditions for trade union activity to the extent that they have inherited large and wealthy trade union organisations from the state socialist past. On the other hand, they are encumbered by their past history as an arm of the Party-state, which sets limits to the degree to which they are willing or able to organise employees in opposition to employers.

The research is being conducted by local research teams in three contrasting Russian regions, two regions in China and one region in Vietnam, with the local teams being co-ordinated by collaborating research institutes in Moscow and Hong Kong which are responsible for day-to-day monitoring of the fieldwork and for preparing background reports on the changing legal and political framework. The research teams are responsible for preparing and updating background reports on relevant legal and political developments in their region and for conducting case studies of trade union activity to identify examples of best practice. The final year of the project will be devoted to collaborative analysis of the data.

### **Key research findings**

Analysis of findings is still at an early stage, but the following important points are emerging:

- Actual and potential labour unrest is the principal factor driving forward trade union reform, but this is mediated by local political conditions. Thus trade unions in Vietnam have been much slower to reform than have those in China, despite high levels of labour unrest in the former country.
- The most serious barrier to the ability of the trade unions to represent their members' interests is the subordination of workplace trade unions to enterprise management.
- Reform of workplace unions is fundamental to the effective resolution of labour disputes, which have been escalating uncontrollably in China and Vietnam. Such reform is impeded by the limited leverage that higher level union bodies have over their workplace unions. The democratic election of trade union leaders is a necessary but by no means a sufficient condition for the development of effective trade unionism. On its own it has little impact on their structural subordination to management.
- The development of regional and sectoral agreements provides the higher level trade unions with a means of starting to overcome the limited capacity of their workplace organisations, although such agreements depend on political support from the relevant authorities.
- Disengagement of trade unions from the state is a slow and contested process, with trade unions and labour ministries each trying to pass the buck to the other. Trade unions try to compensate for their limited organisational strength by mobilising the power and resources of the state to advance their members' interests, but this in turn limits the development of their own organisational strength.
- In all three countries trade unions have been much more effective in representing the interests of better paid workers in larger establishments than in representing the interests of low-paid and disadvantaged workers. They have made very little effort to organise the unorganised in any of the countries.
- The absence of freedom of association and restrictions on the right to strike have not proved significant barriers to independent worker activism in the workplace in China and Vietnam, but have seriously impeded any attempts to develop independent worker representation in and beyond the workplace.
- While the significance of Party control of trade unions in China and Vietnam is often exaggerated by commentators, it remains a key constraint on the unions' capacity to mobilise members in pursuit of legal rights and interests. In this sense, comparison with Russia suggests that Party control formalises and strengthens the political constraints under which trade unions operate, rather than radically altering them. At the same time, the Party in China and Vietnam has been pressing the trade unions more effectively to represent their members and provides them with access to powerful administrative leverage over employers. Our case studies demonstrate that best practice usually occurs when the union takes advantage of these levers.

## Policy and practice implications

We can distinguish policy and practice implications for national governments and trade unions and for international trade union and labour organisations:

### Implications at the national level:

- Employers, employees and the government have a common interest in the more effective regulation of labour relations on the basis of peaceful negotiation.
- The key to the more effective regulation of labour relations is the independence of workplace trade union organisations as representative of their members.
- The independence of workplace trade union organisations requires the election of trade union representatives, the financing of trade union salaries and activities from trade union funds, the legal protection of trade union officers against victimisation and the provision of systematic support in the form of training, advice and technical support from higher level trade union bodies.
- The effective enforcement of labour legislation depends on the development (or renewal) of effective systems of trade union monitoring and reporting at workplace level and close collaboration between trade union and government labour inspectors.
- The effective representation of individual workers' interests by the trade unions requires the trade union to represent the worker in all cases of alleged legal violations by the employer and to pursue the case on behalf of the worker through mediation, arbitration and judicial resolution. Such activity can serve as a primary motivation for trade union membership and means of increasing the legitimacy of the unions in the eyes of the workers.
- The effective representation of workers' collective interests depends on trade union leaders developing negotiating skills and on workplace trade union organisations developing representative structures through which to engage the labour force in the collective bargaining process.
- The development of collective bargaining at local, regional and sectoral levels depends fundamentally on the development of effective employers' organisations.

### Implications at the international level:

- The example of Russia shows that collaboration with international trade union organisations and with the ILO can make an enormous contribution to the democratisation of former state socialist trade unions and to their development of effective trade union practices.
- The ILO has already made a significant contribution to the reform of trade union practices in China and Vietnam and international trade union organisations (ITUC and GUFs), which are currently considering the prospects for collaboration with ACFTU and VGCL, would be well advised to draw on the experience of the ILO.
- The most fruitful areas of collaboration for international trade union organisations with ACFTU and VGCL are in relation to transnational corporations active in China and Vietnam and in the provision of technical and training materials to help to develop skills of collective bargaining, legal representation and dispute resolution. The principal difficulty in developing collaboration is that of identifying appropriate counterparts.

## Key publications and outputs

Simon Clarke, 'The Changing Character of Strikes in Vietnam' *Post-Communist Economies*, 18, 3, 345-61, September 2006

Simon Clarke, Chang-Hee Li and Do Quynh Chi 'From Rights to Interests: The Challenge of Industrial Relations in Vietnam', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Spring 2007.

Simon Clarke, 'Trade Unions in Russia, China and Vietnam', Historical Materialism Conference, London, 9 November 2007

(<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/complabstuds/russia/ngpa/HMPaper.doc>)

Simon Clarke and Tim Pringle, 'Labour activism and the reform of trade unions in Russia, China and Vietnam', NGPA Labour Workshop, 10 December 2007

(<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/complabstuds/russia/ngpa/LabourActivism.doc>)

### For further information

[go.warwick.ac.uk/ngpa](http://go.warwick.ac.uk/ngpa)