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Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007, 326 pp.

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- 1 This book is the first volume to thoroughly document the conditions of Chinese labour since economic reform began almost 30 years ago. Its comprehensiveness lies in the fact that it covers both state workers and migrant workers, giving them equal weight. It is well researched and filled with interesting details and personal anecdotes about the plight of those Chinese workers who have been left by the wayside under China's breakneck industrializing policies. The book focuses on workers' protest activities, their social identities, and their relationship with the new legal system, and is conceptual into the bargain. In short, it is a must-read for university courses.
- 2 The book is organised into seven chapters divided into four parts. The first part, "Decentralized Legal Authoritarianism," lays out the background of labour under the economic reforms and the establishment of a new regulatory labour regime. The second part, "Rustbelt: Protests of Desperation," deals with protests by state workers against layoffs, using Liaoning Province as an example. The third part, "Sunbelt: Protests Against Discrimination," focuses on migrant workers in Guangdong Province, their terrible working conditions, and their protest activities. The last part is "Chinese Labor Politics in Comparative Perspective," comparing Chinese workers with European workers during the industrial revolution, workers in the United States and Mexico, those in South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s, and workers in pre-liberation China, showing that the labour developments in present-day China are not unique. The book concludes with a slightly optimistic observation that there is now a "hidden alliance" between workers and other groups such as farmers and urban home-owners who are using the law to struggle for their legal rights.

- 3 Lee makes several interesting points that have been neglected by other scholars studying Chinese labour. First is her emphasis on the “decentralized legal authoritarianism” resulting from the Chinese government’s political and economic decentralisation. Lee sees this leading to differences in the localised ideological discourse that determines patterns of labour activism in the rustbelt and sunbelt: i.e., activism in the state sector as opposed to activism in the new non-state sectors; and the protest activities of state workers, which she refers to as “protest of desperation,” as opposed to those of migrant workers, which she calls “protest against discrimination.” The book devotes two chapters to state workers, who have encountered massive layoffs and taken to the streets in protests “fueled by moral courage and desperation,” and two to migrant workers, who face exploitation and discrimination due to their lack of “citizenship” rights where they work.
- 4 While I agree that the environments and problems these two types of workers confront are very different, I disagree with Lee’s choice of terms to distinguish between them. If anything, the situation of migrant workers is more desperate than that of laid-off state workers. Far from home and lacking family and community support, they are made to work extremely long hours for illegally low pay. Laid-off workers still have homes, and even without work they often have some kind of safety net, however inadequate. The other characterization that does not seem entirely cogent is the implication that migrant workers are engaged in a “protest against discrimination” for being denied the same rights as urban residents. Migrant workers do not protest against their lack of these rights. Instead, as pointed out by Lee herself, their protests are restricted to complaints over intolerable wages and work conditions. We have yet to hear of migrant workers demanding to be given the same rights and benefits as people who hold an urban hukou (household registration). The day when migrant workers demand abolition of the hukou system will mark the maturation of their consciousness.
- 5 The second important point emphasised by Lee and ignored by most other studies is that migrant workers still have a stake in the land and social commitments of the countryside, and their social identity remains with their places of origin. Chapter Six focuses on this, but an interesting development that Lee does not highlight in this fact-filled chapter is that migrant workers are beginning to reproduce themselves as a class. Quite a number of the migrant worker portraits in this chapter demonstrate that a second generation of migrant workers is emerging, and that it is no longer unusual for two generations—parents and grown children—to be working at the same time in urban factories. It is also no longer rare to see married migrant workers working together in the same factory or in nearby districts. This contradicts the long-held image of migrant workers composed mostly of single young women who work until they marry and are then replaced by another cohort of single young women.
- 6 Finally, a distinction is made between laid-off state workers being prone to collective street protests and migrant workers tending to use legal channels. It is true that migrant workers have become more conscious of their legal rights during the past decade and that the amount of litigation and number of court cases have soared. But does this suggest that migrants are more adept at resorting to legal procedures while state workers are less law-abiding and more militant? Migrant workers are also often reported to leave their factories and go marching on the streets, but this is a more effective tactic for state workers, who can appeal to local authorities in their capacity as local constituents. The higher litigation rate among migrant workers may also be

due to the fact that the foreign-funded factories where they work do not have the mediation committees that tend to exist in state enterprises. Therefore, the only means by which a migrant worker can seek justice is to go outside the workplace, either to legal service agencies or NGOs for help in litigation, or to local labour bureaus to demand arbitration.

- 7 These are minor points, however, vis-à-vis an excellent book that provides us with valuable insights into the conditions of Chinese workers.