

Fred Engst: The different experiences I got being a worker in China and in America

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Today I will talk about my personal experiences. I was born and raised in China, born in Beijing and raised in Xi'an to be exact, so I'm a Xi'anese (spoke with Shaanxi dialect).

Today let's compare my experiences as a worker in Maoist China and in America. Why is this comparison interesting? I thought that many Chinese workers are like "frogs boiled in warm water", when they realized that they lost their social standings, it was too late. I was a worker in Maoist China for 5 years, then I was no longer the master of society as soon as I went to the US (audience laugh). The feeling is so pronounced that it was like heaven and earth.

I graduated from junior high school in 1968, and was allocated to a factory, Guanghua timber mill in Beijing, if you ask me back then what does it feel like to a worker in China, I really couldn't explain it. Because there was no comparison, so there wasn't much feelings, like asking fish to describe what water is like, it really doesn't know the world outside water. Being a worker in the Mao era, I thought the lives of workers were just that, but when I went to the US to be a worker, it really was different. How was it different? It's hard to summarize. If you're in the US, working under a capitalist, you're afraid of the bosses.

There's a saying in China in the 80s, "sharing food from a big pot and you breed free riders!" But really, I learned how to be a "free rider" in the US (audience laugh). Under

Mao, we didn't know how to free ride, why? Because workers back then were "dumb"? not really dumb, we knew full well that the goal of our work is not to make money for the capitalists. The working class is instinctively industrious and brave. Those right-wing bourgeois thinkers, they relish in comforts, they think they are selfish, and so are everyone else, they project themselves onto others. A true worker feels a sense of accomplishment in their labour, "I created it, so I have feelings for it."

I was just an average worker in Guanghua timber mill, first, use a hot roller mill to create a plastic veneer, then transport it to the plywood workshop. Back then I lived in the dormitory, ate in the canteens, and there were study sessions. We learnt about Marxism-Leninism in the 70s, so that was where I got my ideological roots. I lived and ate with the workers, and worked with them. I missed home when I got to America, not just my parents, but also the workers in Guanghua, I missed them even in my dreams.

When I arrived in America I worked for a year in William Hinton's farm, then I went to the factories near Philadelphia, I worked as a copier repairman, a fares register repairman at a mall, later I became unemployed many times.

First time I became unemployed, I thought it was the end of the world. Back in China, there was guaranties, a sense of security, without the trial of capitalism, a Chinese person there really can't cope. Once I became unemployed, I asked: What did I do that's not good enough, why do you not want me anymore, did I do something wrong, on what basis am I fired? (Audience laugh) I became used to it after being unemployed many times, it's just forcing you to take some days off that's it.

Once I was unemployed, I saw a steel factory putting up adverts in the newspaper that they are hiring an electrician, so I went. During the Cultural Revolution I fooled around with electricity, building motors and stuff like that, I have some knowledge of electricity. When I applied for the job I just said I was an electrician, he couldn't verify it in the US anyway. He handed me a motor and a starter, I connected them and he hired me.

The first day of work, the foreman was allocating work, and the workers were all working together, my energy as a Chinese worker was out and before the foreman could even finish, I took my wrench and got to work, no one said anything then, but as soon as the foreman left, a worker grabbed me and said: "What are you doing?!" I said: "fixing the motor!" He said: "Are you stupid? You'll lose your job if you fixed it!" It made sense, so I learned in America, to be a worker you must put on a show: Working hard without actually working, that's true free riding. (audience laugh, clap)

Workers under Mao really didn't know how to free ride, and never did. This is not to say that no one did at all, we had one in our team, we called him Lanbao or Lazy Bun. Other than his assigned duties he never helped anyone else. Other workers though, when I finish, and you're still busy, I'll help you out, then we can rest together.

Back then, the workers were not afraid of the cadres. If the cadres came to the workshop, for example, the director, people would say: "Yo, long time no see, aren't you a bit disconnected from the masses?" Right? If you finished your work and was reading the newspaper, didn't mean you would be afraid of the director. It's because the work comes in batches. We made plastic veneer boards, or plywood, when we glued it

together and put it in the heat press, it would take five to ten minutes, if the director came, you can read your newspaper, drink your tea or chat with your mate, doesn't matter if he was there or not, he couldn't fire you, could he? The workers weren't afraid of the cadres, the cadres, on the other hand, were afraid of the workers, afraid that they might put up big-character posters. (audience laugh)

When I was working in the US, it was totally different, you have to work when the foreman came, or you were gone. The management controlled your right to work, that was a big right.

So think about it, in the Mao era, how do you boost the workers' productivity? The officials and cadres had no right to fire you, no right to withhold your wage, so why did the masses and workers work so hard? For what? It was really unbelievable for people nowadays.

Being a worker under capitalism, as soon as the cadre leaves, the working stops, am I right? (audience laugh, clap) the conditions for capitalism is the carrot and the stick, bonus on the one hand to incentivize you, if that didn't work, fires you on the other, this is the relations of production under capitalism.

However, the workers under capitalism aren't pushovers, they learned through struggle how to deal with the capitalists, they learn how to free ride. Learning how to deal with a capitalist is an art, I can say a few examples, and see how the workers fight with the capitalists. The most effective is unions, not yellow unions, the workers' own union, this is very important, but smaller struggles in everyday work is also important.

I worked in a car factory for 7 to 8 years. Once there was an order, for almost a hundred vehicles, like train carts. I was an electrician, installing those really thick cables under the carts. The first ten we learned how to do it with a blueprint, after that it was timed.

Someone watched your every move with a timer and a note pad, recording your time, how “scientific”! The black man working with me was experienced, he said: “ Today, I’ll do the part you’re familiar with, and you do what I’m familiar with, if you’re left-handed, use your right hand, if you’re right-handed, use your left hand, normally we use gas-operated tools, today we’ll use hand tools.” (audience laugh, clap)

That wasn’t enough, the screw cap used for securing the cables automatically locks, there was a plastic ring on it, so when you turn the screw, you have to secure it, or else it would unwind, and you’d never tighten it. Normally these screws took ten rounds to tighten, today we would give it twenty turns. There were two wenches on the screw, one on top and one on the bottom, but you can only see the top one, you turn the one on top continuously, for 20 turns, the one on the bottom went up and down, but you only let it click ten times, you have to make sure it was 20 turns every time, you couldn’t have one that’s 15, if there was one, the factory will count according to that, and you have blown your cover.

We had to look like we were invested too. It was a hot August, and we had towels on our forehead, or else the sweat would get into our eyes, our t-shirts were soaked, the two of us put on a show, and it was a good one. In a few days, the work was almost done, he tallied it, and said it was some 30 hours, we were relieved. Later we became

proficient, a year later I could finish the job in 5 hours, but I still reported as 30. Why? Because I was also in university part-time, I did all my math calculus homework in the toilet, what else could I do without the time?

This relationship between labour and capital, the manager and the managed, if they are antagonistic, then it will be like a game of cat and mouse, you can have your disciplines, and I'll have my tricks, there is a saying in China, policies up there, countermeasures down here, the workers have their countermeasures, of course, the main one is the union, the workers' own organization, through this way they can fight the capitalists.

I often came back to China after I went to the US, every time I would go to the factory. I came back in 1977 because I missed home, besides missing my parents, I also went to the Guanghua timber mill to be a worker again, a few months every time, to relive what was it like to be a worker (tears drop). Why is this? Why didn't I feel like reliving my days in the US factory, why did I always want to return to China to live with the old factory and the old workers for just a little longer? Back then the workers truly were comrades; being a worker in the US on the other hand, the workers had connections, but there were no connections with the company, all you remember is how the boss discipline you, it was always antagonistic.

The Guanghua timber mill in Beijing is gone now, I feel really pitiful, and the factory I worked in the US also went bankrupt, I also feel pitiful, but the work environment, I don't miss one bit. Why do I always miss being a worker in Guanghua? I visit them often, many of the Guanghua workers live in Chuiyangliu. Here, we can say that the working

class as the master of society is different from the working class as the wage-labourer; I was a worker in the Mao era, it was my occupation, being a worker now is being a wage labourer, the nature is completely different, one is being your own master, and one is being enslaved. (Claps)

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Why is the working class the way it is today? This is a deep topic, and a complicated one too, I can't say it plainly, so I'll put it in another way. Which way? I was a naughty boy, how naughty? I grew up in the Caotan farm in Xi'an when I was 3 or 4 years old, the straws piled up really high when we were harvesting wheat in the summer, so I took a broom and swept them to one side, and lit a fire! Right beside the huge pile of straws, it was so dangerous, but I liked the flames, I thought it was pretty. My dad saw me, he came out of the cowshed, jumped over the fence and trampled out the flame, he grabbed me inside and hit me hard on the butt, I remember I was sort of unconscious for a few days. I was afraid of him, but I still liked playing with fire, just now when he was around.

Last time I played with fire was during the "Four Clean" campaign in 1965, there's a river in between the farm and the village, they were afraid of foot-and-mouth disease spreading so they sent us young people to maintain the farm and didn't let the cow and horse carts across the bridge so the animals would get sick. I was sitting there doing nothing, and there weren't that many carts, so I went to set fires again. It was November, a lot of leaves and grass on the ground, the fire grew larger and larger, it

looked fun though. But the village was just beside it, it was where we live. I was worried, what if the village caught fire, I got scared and put out the fire with my clothes, from then on I never dared play with fire. (Audience laugh)

It's the same with the working class. You can tell us: "If you don't care about state affairs, one day you will endure the same bitterness and suffer again." But we wouldn't listen like I wouldn't listen to my dad even if he hit me. (Audience laugh, clap) People have to have both positive and negative experiences to know the truth, positive experiences alone are not enough. (Claps) sometimes I am pessimistic, Why do people have to go through it again? Why should there be negative examples? We have many negative examples, we should thank them. The working class experienced both sides, so when we build socialism, we will think about how to prevent the capitalist from taking our "house". We can't just build it, we need to protect it from the capitalists, this is very important. (clapping vigorously)

Thank you!

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