

Unionist Han Dongfang played a key role in the 1989 Tiananmen Square student revolts. Arrested, jailed and released, Han now directs the Hong Kong-based “China Labor Bulletin,” an NGO that defends the rights of Chinese workers and peasants

The Man Who Stopped Tanks With his Hands

CHINA 2

By Francesca Lancini



Han Dongfang was a key actor in the Tiananmen Square protests. In the spring of 1989, the 26-year-old Han founded China’s first free trade union. The gesture was the first act in a vivid and visual challenge to China’s Communist regime. Over two decades, Han has evolved into an elegant, courteous and supremely calm man. He speaks slowly, in perfect English, opening his palms and flexing long tapered fingers.

His lively eyes show joy and sadness as they retrace poignant and painful history. Not once in an hour-long conversation does Han lose his concentration or his focus. When he’s finally called away he leaves with regret.

Since 1994, Han has run the “China Labor Bulletin,” a Hong Kong-based NGO that monitors life on the mainland in an effort to defend the rights of Chinese workers and peasants, a task that has become

pressing as the global economic crisis has begun making itself felt in China.

"My work saved my life," says Han, who arrived in Hong Kong in 1993 after several years of imprisonment, torture and grave illness. "At first Hong Kong was like a trap. I was very unhappy. Coming from north China, I felt like a stranger. At some point, though, I realized that being forced to be here would at least allow me to learn another legal and political system. I sensed that Hong Kong's openness, and the way it was poised between East and West, might make it an excellent spot from which to help Chinese workers. I couldn't do that by accepting political asylum in Europe or in the United States. So I stayed, and after 16 years it's become my second home."

Han was born in Beijing in 1963, the son of poor rural migrants from the province of Shanxi. The Cultural Revolution sent the family back to the provinces, where his parents separated. Han lived with mother, who in 1971 moved back to Beijing, supporting Han and his sister on construction worker's salary. "I never forgot my roots. My political passion on behalf of the dispossessed comes from my roots," says Han, smiling. "It seems strange to say, but it was my Communist education that gave me an awareness of equality and justice."

After high school, the romantic idea of living in harmony under communism led him to a three-year stint in the army. But he soon began noticing the extent of corruption in military ranks. Orders were harder to follow. He left the military and became an electrician and was hired to work for the state railway system in the capital.

It took only five years to get to the Tiananmen Square turning point. His days as a worker had made him particularly sensitive issues of social justice. When he heard the democratically-oriented speeches made by students who had gathered in the Beijing square beginning on April 15, 1989, he joined in. Four days later, Prime Minister Li Peng declared martial law. By then, Han, who had set up shop in red tent in a corner of the vast square, had already started an independent union and enlisted 200 members.

But on June 3, the military intervened and the massacre began. Soldiers opened fire. Han fled the frenzy on a bicycle and sought refuge where he could. Blacklisted, he finally



turned himself in to police, telling himself "I've done nothing wrong," almost mechanically. The idealism tinged with naiveté and fear cost him dearly. He was detained for 22 months, mistreated, staged hunger strikes and contracted tuberculosis, which was already widespread among the other prisoners. He was released only as a result of an international campaign that began embarrassing the Beijing government. He was released with damaged lungs and weighing only 40 kilos. He traveled to the U.S. for treatment but vowed to return.

"Instead, I never set foot in China again," he says. "I tried getting back in by crossing over from Hong Kong but was always stopped at the border." He's since developed a more realistic view of his situation, and also become a critic of China's



metamorphosis: “China has changed in 20 years, especially after it adopted a market economy and became a part of the globalization process. After 1989, the government began encouraging people to think only to money. Those who tried to bring attention to social and political issues were arrested.”

The time of massive protest movements seems gone, but that doesn’t mean Chinese authorities don’t face popular challenges. “The Chinese no longer protest for ideological and political reasons, but in favor of their rights as wage-earners. They want to be paid adequate wages and oppose the expropriation of land and houses, which is still very frequent throughout the country, particularly when the government wants to create new industrial areas.”

According to Han, Chinese requests are so pragmatic — they seek tax reform, pensions and health and education system — as to approximate the citizenry of an operating democracy. On the “China Labor Bulletin” (CLB), Han writes: “Because of the financial crisis the authorities tend to turn a blind eye to violations of labor rights, hoping by doing so they help safeguard economic growth and social stability. But the government shouldn’t forget that the ‘Labor Contract Law’ of 2007, which workers can use as a point of reference for rights.” An estimated 20 million migrants are believed to have lost their jobs and been forced from cities back to rural areas. Does the Chinese work force know this? The CLB’s, downloadable from the Internet, exist to create awareness.

Work safety is among the most clicked pages at www.china-labour.org.hk/en. “Deaths, injuries and diseases are widespread among the work force but this doesn’t seem to matter to factory chiefs since their primary concern is cheap output,” says Han. “Victims of workplace accident aren’t even compensated to pay for medical expenses or retain counsel.”

This leads back to the idea that Han set in motion in 1989, and which first got him in trouble with authorities: “If the workers could meet in a free union, the situation would be totally different. Today there’s a trade union party that’s completely useless because its members are elected by management. The head of the union is basically the head of human resources. But workers still strike and carry out negotiations with bosses even at the risk of being arrested. How long will the government tolerate the paradox? I’m fairly sure the idea of government unions are on their last legs.”

Among the CLB’s most vital objective is mine safety, since China has a vast network of mines. The accident rates are appalling. Over the last 12 months some 3,000 accidents have claimed an estimated 5,000 dead and an unknown number of injured. The toll reads like a war bulletin. China’s unbridled economic growth depends to a large on coal energy, leading to shortcuts in mining practices.

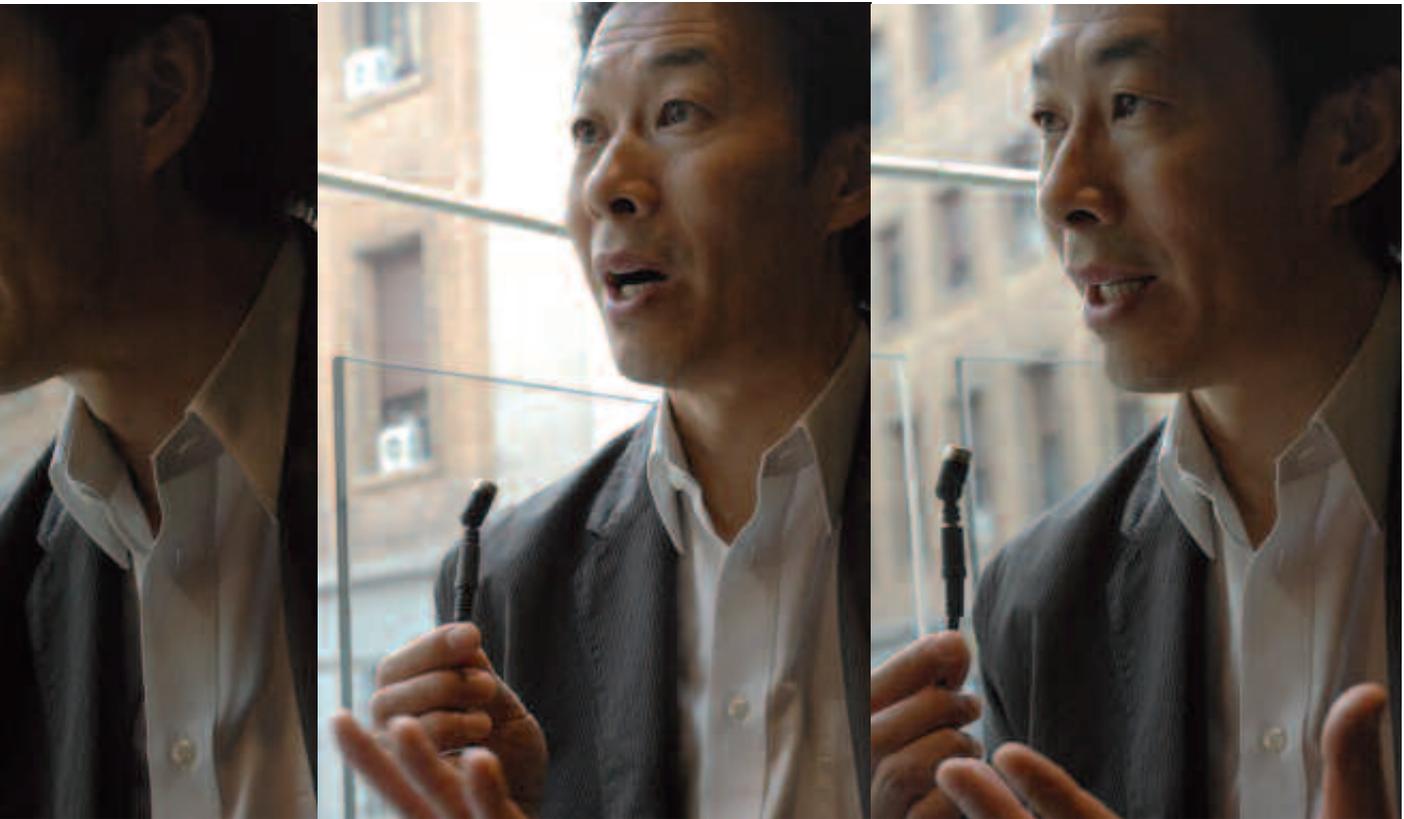
“Mines are working at well beyond their maximum level because the demand for coal is so high,” says Han. “When accidents occur, the authorities close the mines instead of



Han Dongfang, Chinese unionist and editor of the “China Labour Bulletin,” a publication dedicated to defending worker rights and security.

rebuilding them according to safety codes. To keep prices stable, other mines need to produce more to fill in the gaps left by the mines that





have been closed, which in turn increases the risk of new accidents.” The CLB has proposed that miner workers organize safety committees to monitor working conditions. Some miners, fearing firing, continue working even when they know a shaft is compromised. It can be a lethal form of dedication.

The Internet is vital to finding information on the conditions in which Chinese workers work. Han says that there are several newspapers and online sites that let readers post their complaints: “The government tries to censor them, but can’t block them all. It would probably need to cut off all access to the Internet, but that would be very counterproductive for a world power.”

Han’s other bridge to China is a program he hosts on Radio Free Asia, which is funded in part by the U.S. Congress. Three times a week, Han takes calls and reads letters from Chinese workers in an effort to give them advice and practical help. “With the money we raise from listeners all over the world we can pay for the lawyers who defend our listeners. Lawsuits can help educate employers on the importance of improving

conditions in their factories.”

Many companies with poor health and safety records produce goods for Western industry, but Han refuses to get involved in the controversy. “The most realistic way to improve conditions for Chinese workers is not by conducting campaigns against the multinationals,” he says, “but to prosecute those who violate the law.”

Han’s broadcasts are heard by tens of millions of people. Though he’s the father of four children, he doesn’t worry that the regime might object to his efforts and consider reprisals. He’s not a dissident, he insists, just someone who seeks to improve conditions for workers. “I’m not a victim nor a coward, just the fruit of my destiny,” he says with a combination of oriental aplomb Protestant earnestness. He embraces Protestantism while living in the United States. He misses China, though he knows the CLB can only operate out of Hong Kong. After family, the work is his life. In the Year of the Ox, a symbol of determination, Han’s sense of motivation is stronger than ever.