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LERA Session Title: Transformation of the World of Work and Labor Movements in Asia

Paper Title: **Informal Work and Labor Unrest in China**

Paper Abstract:

Scholars interpret the informalization of work in China as a facet of the state's developmental strategy to deliberately reduce labor costs and strengthen the comparative advantage of low cost of Chinese products in the global market (Friedman & Lee, 2010; Kuruvilla, Lee & Gallagher, 2011; Lee & Kofman, 2012). In this paper, we seek to address the question of how on the one hand informal work successfully maintains low labor costs, but on the other hand also ensure workforce and social stability. By examining worker's lived experiences of informal work in two regional sanitation industries in China respectively in Wenzhou and Guangzhou, the authors are able to show two distinctive models of how worker's work experience in the informal sector influences their daily lives and struggles.

The authors find that flexible work arrangements in the Wenzhou case have allowed workers to engage in intensive informal work other than regular sanitation jobs, which finances family incomes and therefore stabilizes the workforce. In contrast, sanitation workers in Guangzhou who are unable to use informal work opportunities to significantly increase family incomes have been involved in a series of strikes. The authors therefore conclude the paper by arguing that informal work increases family incomes and therefore serve to maintain the very low labor costs in the formal sector, and at the same time reduces workers' discontent and labor unrest through the intensification of their labor.