

The Changing Nature of Labor Unrest in China

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Abstract

We argue that there is a qualitative shift underway in the nature of labor protest in China. Contrary to prior literature that characterized strikes as being largely defensive in nature, we suggest that since 2008, Chinese workers have been striking offensively for more money, better working conditions, and more respect from employers. We explain these developments using a political process model that suggests economic and political opportunities, such as a growing labor shortage, new labor laws, and new media openness, are sending “cognitive cues” to workers that they have increased leverage, leading them to be more assertive in their demands. Utilizing a unique dataset of strikes that we have collected, two case studies of strikes in aerospace factories, and interviews with a variety of employment relations stakeholders, we find support for our argument.