

**Abstract for Global Labor University Conference 2018**

**Theme: Trade Union Organization and Strategies**

**Title: Worker-led attempt to build trade unions in China**

**Submitted by: Elaine Sio-ieng HUI (Assistant Professor, Penn State University)**

This article examines how disaffected rank-and-filers in China have attempted to obtain institutional power in their workplaces. In China, enterprise union officials are generally appointed by managers or upper-level unions, rather than elected by members. Union presidents are often concurrently Chinese Communist Party cadres or senior managers of enterprises. Until 2003, rural-migrant workers were ineligible to join trade unions. However, since the 2010 Honda strike and the strike wave it ignited, the national and provincial governments and upper level trade unions have started to promote workplace union elections. As will be illustrated by this paper, vocal and reform-minded rank-and-filers have taken this opportunity to run for union office. Additionally, some progressive workers have tried to establish unions in their workplaces to fight for better working conditions. However, my research shows that the state, the state-controlled trade unions, party-branches, and employers have together, to a large extent, incapacitated this type of bottom-up activism.

I collected data in Guangdong, China between 2010 and 2016. To examine how rank-and-filers run for workplace union office, I interviewed 15 workers, hired by factories in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Foshan. To examine how rank-and-filers establish unions in the workplace, I studied two cases—one of which took place in a molding factory in Shenzhen and the other in an electronics factory in Guangzhou. I interviewed 8 rank-and-filers and 5 labor NGO staff members who were deeply involved in the two cases.