



NO CHOICE BUT TO FIGHT

A Documentation of Chinese Battery
Women Workers' Struggle for Health and Dignity

“No Choice but to Fight!”

*A documentation of battery women workers' struggle
for health and dignity*

Globalization Monitor

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Chapter One

Major Players *and* Minor Players

There are many players in our story: some have major parts while others are little more than walk-ons. But when all the parts are put together, they form a complex ongoing narrative, a real-life drama edging slowly and surely towards a tragedy of epic proportions. At the heart of this dark tale is a chemical dust so fine that a human being can breathe it in and not even notice that he or she is doing so. The dust comes from the chemical called cadmium. It is the central figure in our story: without cadmium, there would be no story.

An Introduction to Cadmium

Cadmium (Cd), is a silvery white coloured heavy metal. Resistant to corrosion and abrasion, it is a common carcinogenic chemical with a soft texture that is extremely elastic. It is non-degradable and therefore poses an environmental hazard when discarded as industrial waste. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classifies cadmium and its compounds as Group¹ of carcinogen for humans.¹ When inhaled, cadmium is eliminated from the human body via urine. However, the amount of cadmium excreted daily in this manner is very small. It represents only about 0.005 – 0.01% of the total body burden which corresponds to a biological half-life for cadmium of about 20-40

¹ <http://monographs.iarc.fr/ENG/Classification/crthgr01.php>. For more information on cadmium, please refer to the documentation on cadmium released by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, USA: <http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/cadmium/index.html>.

years.² Consequently cadmium causes long-term damage to many organs and tissues, especially the kidneys and skeletal structure. In Japan cadmium related diseases were called Itai-itai disease, with 'itai' means 'painful'. The severe bone pains induced by cadmium poisoning caused such distress that victims would cry out "Pain! Pain!"

In July 2006, concerns about the toxicity of cadmium led the European Union (EU) to ban the production of electrical appliances and electrical goods that contain cadmium along with the import of nickel cadmium batteries.³

Cadmium oxide, which is red in colour, is chiefly used in the manufacturing of nickel cadmium batteries, whose chief application is making negative electrodes to transmit electric current.

In 2004 China produced half of the world's batteries, 80 percent of which were for export.⁴ This was the result of the relocation of the industry - along with many other industries - to China from the rest of the world. In that year China exported 800 million nickel cadmium batteries, a rise of 67 percent over the 1999 level. China has thus also become greatest consumer of cadmium as well: in 2004 China consumed half of the world's cadmium production, 70 to 80 percent of which was destined for nickel cadmium batteries.⁵

The Hong Kong Gold Peak Industries Group also manufactures their batteries in mainland China.

2 Scientific Report on the Conditions of Work, Cadmium Exposure and Health Problems experienced by Gold Peak's Chinese Workers, April 2007.

3 Nordic Council of Ministers, *Cadmium Review*. www.who.int/ifcs/documents/forums/forum5/nmr_cadmium.pdf (accessed 29 Jul. 2008).

4 *Zhongguo dianchi gongye jingying quanshu* (China's Battery Industry). (Beijing: Hangkong gongye chubanshe, 2006), p. 284.

5 <http://www.asianmetal.cn/report/2007ge.pdf> (accessed on July 29, 2008).

It is neither expensive nor complicated to ensure that a working environment using cadmium is made safe. The chief requirements are pre-vocational training, efficient ventilation systems and effective face masks, all of which are now legal obligations under China's Production Safety Law and the Law on Prevention and Treatment of Occupational Diseases. Gold Peak ignored these statutes and in fact did not inform workers of the potentially poisonous nature of cadmium, which is also a legal obligation. We believe there is enough evidence to suggest that the company violated regulations in order to keep unit costs down and profits up. Human health was simply not a consideration in its calculations, rendering the three mainland factories and one Hong Kong plant in our story very dangerous places to work indeed. In 2004, more than 400 workers were found to have excessive levels of cadmium in their bodies, and later two were diagnosed with chronic cadmium poisoning. Since then the number of workers found having excessive cadmium levels has decreased, but the number of workers diagnosed with cadmium poisoning rose to 21 by early 2008.

Once information on the appalling health and safety situations in their factories entered the public arena, Gold Peak shifted from denial to blaming their workers:

"It is generally known that smoking cigarettes and eating shellfish, such as oysters, a common food in mainland China, increases cadmium levels in the body."⁶ "On your wages?" was the sarcastic response from the astonished women workers most of whom didn't smoke and had rarely tasted oysters!

As we will demonstrate in this book, Gold Peak employees' cadmium-related health problems were not caused by eating oysters or smoking cigarettes. Their condition is a direct result of employment at Gold Peak-owned factories using cadmium oxide in production without proper regard for industrial safety and workers' health.

6 Gold Peak's response to an enquiry from a Swiss group in February 2006.

While writing this book with the Gold Peak workers, we found ourselves on a learning curve that demanded an understanding of basic technical and descriptive terms. Here are the most commonly used.

Urinary Cadmium

This refers to the concentration of cadmium in urine. Because most cadmium accumulates in the kidneys, measuring the amounts of cadmium in urine is used as a guide to increased exposure.

Blood Cadmium

Measuring cadmium concentration in blood indicates *recent* cadmium contact *only*. It is a useful criteria in determining cases of acute cadmium poisoning. In 2002, the Ministry of Health issued the Diagnostic Criteria for Occupational Cadmium Poisoning (GBZ17-2002). The document states that:

“because there is no established quantifiable relationship between the recent exposure of cadmium and the degree of cadmium concentration in the blood, and there is as yet inadequate information as to the relationship between the level of cadmium in the blood and abnormality of the kidneys, we therefore do not list cadmium in the blood as one of the criteria for the diagnosis of chronic cadmium poisoning. Excessive cadmium in the blood can be evidence of overexposure to cadmium for the diagnosis of acute cadmium poisoning.”⁷

Placed under Observation

The diagnostic criteria state that when two successive cadmium urine tests reveal levels of cadmium above 5 $\mu\text{mol/mol}$ creatinine, the subject must be placed under observation. This level is deemed excessive but not yet a clinical manifestation of chronic cadmium poisoning. Research has shown that when cadmium in urine measures between 5 and 10 $\mu\text{mol/mol}$ creatinine, there is

7 <http://www.gdpcc.com/standard/standard17.htm> (accessed July 25, 2008). In Chinese. Appendix A states: “Cadmium in blood is a good indicator of the most recent measure of cadmium contact.”

a 5-20 per cent chance of kidney dysfunction developing. Being placed under observation requires that the subject must undergo annual tests to ensure that levels do not increase and require reclassification as poisonous.

Cadmium Poisoning

There are two categories of cadmium poisoning: acute and chronic. Both categories have varying degrees of severity. For example, a diagnosis of mild chronic poisoning must be made when:

1. the levels of cadmium in their urine exceed the normal level in two successive urine tests.
2. the patients develop symptoms of poisoning such as dizziness and fainting spells, exhaustion, a loss of the sense of smell and/or aching back and limbs.
3. when laboratory tests demonstrate one of the following biological changes:
 - the concentration of Beta-2 microglobulin in urine is greater than 9.6 $\mu\text{mol/mol}$ creatinine (or ' $\mu\text{mol/mol Cr}$ ' in short form)
 - the concentration of retinal-binding protein in urine is greater than 5.1 $\mu\text{mol/mol}$ creatinine

The 'Gold' in Gold Peak

A second player in our story is the company itself: Gold Peak Industries (Holdings) Limited (hereafter Gold Peak). It is a holding company well known in Hong Kong for its famous brand GP Batteries. Apart from producing disposable batteries, Gold Peak also produces batteries for electrical appliances and electric cars.

The Gold Peak Group was established in 1964, and floated on the Hong Kong stock exchange in 1984. By the 1990s Gold Peak had become an Asian transnational company with extensive industrial investments, mainly in the electrical appliances and electronics industries. During 2002-2003, the group employed over 15,000 people, its annual turnover topped HK\$5.5 billion with total capi-

talization standing at HK\$8.1 billion. The group owns the GP Industrial Limited Company, which again owned two main companies, the Gold Peak Batteries International Limited Corporation, and formerly CIH Limited (which was sold in 2006). These two companies have been independently floated on the Singapore stock market. The Gold Peak Group's overall current production facilities, product research and development and marketing offices are spread over ten countries. It is the tenth largest battery manufacturer in the world and second largest in Asia. Apart from batteries, it also produces electric cable on a global scale.

Gold Peak Group was selected to provide the lighting for the Hong Kong government's millennium ceremony in 2000. In 2003, the GP Batteries was selected by The Chinese Manufacturers' Association of Hong Kong as one of their top ten brands. Gold Peak has been selected by the Olympic Games 2008 to provide batteries for its 45 seat electric bus.

GP Batteries have long been Gold Peak's 'gold mountain.' For many years the turnover from battery business has accounted for more than half of the group's total turnover. In 2002, GP Batteries outperformed its rivals in both production and sales and boasted profit margins of over 40 percent. In 2004 profit from the battery business accounted for almost 40 percent of the group's gross profit.

Gold Peak is subcontracted by many famous brands: EverReady, Siemens, Sony, Panasonic, Rayovac, Nikon, Canon, Toshiba, Fuji, JVC, Kodak, Konica, Minolta, Olympus, Pentax, Ricoh, etc.

Gold Peak's annual company reports speak of its concern for the general public interest and claim this is clearly demonstrated through its participation in various public and government run projects, for instance the Youth Pre-Employment Training Programme, which resulted in Gold Peak winning the Council of Hong Kong Social Service's 'Caring Company Award' for two consecutive years. The company's apparent green credentials are highlighted via participa-

tion in the Mobile Phone Battery Recovery and Recycling Programme jointly organised by Hong Kong's Environmental Protection Department in conjunction with the industrial sector,⁸ and also in an educational project called Green Living Starts With Me jointly run with the Business Environment Council. The fact that disposable batteries are hardly in the spirit of environmental protection appears to have gone over the heads of the company's public relations people and their partners.

When Gold Peak boasts of its concern for employees – as it frequently does in press releases and company reports – our story ventures into the realm of the absurd. For example, chairman Victor Lu Zhongrong (hereon after we will use his Hong Kong name, Victor Lo) stated in the 'Human Resources' section of the 2003-04 GP Annual Report that "people are the Group's greatest asset and the Group is committed to providing an environment across its various divisions where employees feel valued and appreciated, thereby nurturing a sense of belonging to the Group." As we will show in this book, employees have been valued only so far as they have facilitated Gold Peak's striving for increased profits and market share irrespective of their health, welfare or happiness.

Gold Peak's rapid development has gone hand in hand with China's integration into the global market. Three years after the launch of economic reform on the mainland in 1978, Gold Peak subsidiary CIH Limited entered mainland China with a project to supply high quality products such as electrical switch sockets to the Guangzhou China Hotel – now known as the Marriot Hotel. At the time, this was one of the city's key foreign investment ventures and CIH Limited's participation helped it to dominate the high-end electrical goods and services market with a 90 percent market share during the early 1980s. Like many other Hong Kong companies, Gold Peak soon began to shift its production facilities to mainland China in order to take advantage of the investor-friendly environment in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. Independent trade unions were

8 http://www.epd.gov.hk/epd/english/environmentinhk/waste/prob_solutions/wrfp_mobile.html (accessed on July 29, 2008).

– and still are – banned, wages were – and still are – low and any attempts to organise by workers were – and still are – suppressed by the state. In 1986, Gold Peak entered into a joint venture with the Desay Group, which was founded by the Huizhou City Government in 1983 under the name of Huizhou City General Industrial Development Corporation specifically to attract foreign capital. Gold Peak was its first big partner. The local Huizhou government's role was crucial in Desay's development especially at the outset:

When it was working to attract foreign capital, the Corporation enjoyed the wholehearted backing of the local government. This enabled Desay to enter into a partnership with an external company, form a strategic alliance with the relevant players and establish a small number of joint ventures.⁹

In 1996 Desay was listed in the Top 50 Industrial Companies supported by the Guangdong provincial government; in 1999 the Ministry of Foreign Economic Trade selected Desay as one of China's Top 50 Foreign Invested Export Enterprises and it was also one of China's Top 520 Major Enterprises. Another business partner of GP is TCL,¹⁰ which was established in Huizhou in 1981 as a large-scale state owned enterprise making and retailing electronic goods, electrical appliances, information technology and telecommunications products such as mobile phones. It is now a major brand in China. Of note to our story is that TCL's biggest shareholder is the Huizhou city government, which owns more than 40 percent of the company's total stock.¹¹ GP once owned significant

9 "In 1992 the Huizhou City People's Government officially formed the Desay Group Corporation on the basis of the official backing of the Huizhou City General Industrial Development Corporation." See the Chronicle of Events on the Desay web site at <http://www.desay.com/docc/about/memorabilia.asp> (accessed on July 29, 2008).

10 TCL stands for The Creative Life, as explained on the company's website: http://www.tcl.com/main_en/ (accessed on July 29, 2008). When it was founded in 1981, TCL stood for Today China Lion.

11 Chinese University of Hong Kong professor Lang Xianping (also known as Lang Hsien-ping), has suggested that there were irregularities concerning the privatisation of state owned shares in TCL. See Lang Xianping, *Wu qu: Zhongguo qi ye zhan lue si wei wu qu fen xi* (Beijing: Dongfang Chubanshe, 2006), chapter 7.

shares of TCL and Victor Lo was once appointed member of the board of directors. Like Desay, TCL is also a major battery producer.

Gold Peak has established subsidiaries in most of China's large cities and at least 17 of these are dedicated to battery manufacturing with GP Batteries as the flagship brand. The brand has been among China's top ten best-selling products since 1997. In 2002, Gold Peak bought a 75 percent share in Zhongyin (Ningbo) Batteries, China's second biggest alkaline batteries business, gaining its top brand, Shuanglu, in the process. The acquisition lays the foundation for Gold Peak to become the top player in China's battery production market.

Gold Peak has three battery-producing factories in Huizhou. Huizhou Power Pack Co. Ltd., or Power Pack for short, is known as the 'new factory' and was founded in 1994. In 2006, it employed 1,500 people. Huizhou Advance Battery Technology Co. Ltd., or Advance Battery, was established in 1987, and at one time employed almost 1,300 people. It is known as the 'old factory'. Both are located within the city limits and both produce nickel cadmium batteries. The newest and most modern factory was founded in 2003 and is called the Huizhou Modern Battery Ltd. Whereas the media have carried many stories on the cadmium scandal at Power Pack, there has been relatively little publicity about Advance Battery. The workers' struggle at the former factory was the catalyst to our story and was distinguished by the emergence of a layer of activists and representatives. When the struggle spread to the 'old factory' Advance Battery, a combination of pressure from both the workforce and the local community forced the closure of the factory in 2004.

Former line supervisor Jiang Xiaomei recalls:

The Advance Battery began making nickel cadmium batteries as soon as it opened. It was known as the Sylva factory for five or six years. At first it was a joint venture with Desay. Then it was renamed Advance Battery. In 1987, the factory was small, consisting of just a few old buildings with tiled roofs. In 1988 a new factory was built.

I was attending a nearby middle school at the time. They employed locals and I even used to play inside it. When I graduated from junior middle school in May 1990 I went to work in the factory.

The third factory involved in this story of cadmium poisoning case was the Shenzhen JetPower Batteries Ltd., or JetPower for short. It was also the subsidiary of the Gold Peak Batteries. Due to various reasons JetPower workers were less militant than those in the other two factories. The Hong Kong Sylva Industries Limited, also subsidiary of Gold Peak Batteries, experienced cadmium poisoning outbreak in September 2004 as well, we do not have space in this book to tell their story.

Victor Lo is currently both Gold Peak's chairman and chief executive. He joined Gold Peak after graduating with a science degree in 1972. Lo is now regarded as something of a public figure in Hong Kong. He is a well-known industrialist and has won the government's Golden Bauhinia medal in recognition of his outstanding success in promoting science and technology. He has also held successive posts as deputy chairman and chairman of the Federation of Hong Kong Industries, chairman of Hong Kong Polytechnic University board of directors, and chairman of the Hong Kong Science Park Company. Perhaps unavoidable given his wealth and success, he is also an eminent socialite on the Hong Kong 'scene'. In 2005 he went into politics and was appointed by the chief executive Donald Tsang as an Executive Councillor. Not unrelated to his rise in wealth and renown in Hong Kong's elite circles, Victor Lo has also built up strong relationships with Huizhou government officials and is an honorary citizen of Huizhou city.

Lo's views on labour rights are conservative, especially when it comes to regulating workers' wages. In 2006, when a reporter questioned his views and suggestions on regulating minimum wages and maximum working hours, Lo said, "I believe in the power of the market. Of course the legislature can consider this matter, but the less interference the better."

Local government officials

During the last two decades, the Pearl River Delta area has developed into a huge export processing zone. With its low labour costs and a variety of tax incentives, it has attracted capital from all over the world, with funds from Hong Kong and Taiwan leading the way. Due to its location in Guangdong province, Huizhou greatly benefited from this rapid economic development. The annual value of Huizhou's total output grew from just three billion yuan in 1988 to 80 billion yuan in 2005. Put another way, a small backwater town has transformed itself into a large industrial city in under 20 years. Official websites frequently list its selling points: "one of the world's biggest production bases for batteries; Asia's largest production base for telephones and computer mother boards; more than 40 percent of the world's annual output of CD and DVD laser heads."¹² In terms of economic growth, these figures represent an achievement that the government can with some justification feel proud about. But there has been a price to pay: a dramatic rise in occupational disease and injury that has enveloped the city like a medieval plague.

According to official figures, there are more than 25 million people in more than 500,000 enterprises in mainland China who have come into contact with industrial hazards such as poisonous materials and substances, dust, and noise. The 2004 report of the State Administration for Work Safety (SAWS) stated that:

"China has the world's highest number of people who are in contact with occupational hazards, the highest number of occupational diseases victims and death resulting from such diseases, and the highest number of new cases as well. Approximately 700,000 people suffer from occupational diseases every year. Industrially developed countries have largely resolved traditional occupational hazards like pneumoconiosis, acute and chronic

12 Liu Li, "The Left Hand Digitizes While the Right Hand Fossilizes: Series on the Construction of Huizhou, Guangdong as a Civilized City, Part 1". *Science and Technology Online*. July 29, 2008. http://www.stdaily.com/big5/stdaily/2006-11/14/content_594465.htm

occupational poisoning, and damage from noise in the workplace, but in China they remain a serious threat to workers' safety and health."

Poor labour protection measures have resulted in an ongoing reduction of the time separating workers' contact time with a hazard to their actually becoming ill. And the fatality rate for victims has risen from under 15 percent to more than 20 percent. Occupational hazards are serious because:

"In their rush for instant success and quick profits in recent years, some local governments do not carry out proper evaluations of the implications of FDI-funded projects for occupational health and safety. They are permitting dangerous industries to set up shop and pose serious risks to Chinese employees' physical health. Moreover, environmental pollution from chemicals and radiation are giving a boost to the incidences of illnesses previously classified as rare.¹³"

Lack of relevant legislation is not the cause of this surge in occupational diseases. On the contrary, the legislation is quite advanced and well-defined with relatively high standards for a developing country. For example, mainland diagnosis standards regarding cadmium are higher than those in Hong Kong. The problem lies with law enforcement. Restrictions and administrative constraints on migrant workers' civil liberties are enthusiastically implemented by local governments, while laws and regulations that should protect migrant workers from exploitation are ignored by bosses confident that government officials will not act to implement them.

13 "Safe production in China: situation remains grim." *Renmin Wang – Guonei Xinwen*, May 28, 2004. Nearly 10 million employees in Guangdong province are engaged in hazardous jobs. The five major industries causing occupational diseases are: processing precious stones (pneumoconiosis), shipping container production (pneumoconiosis from welding), shoe production and leather processing (benzene poisoning causes leukaemia and aplastic anaemia), electroplating, battery production (lead and cadmium poisoning). Other potentially hazardous industries are prominent in Guangdong, such as electronics and printing. Specialist occupational disease inspectors and supervisors are extremely scarce.

Huizhou is typical in this regard. In November 2006, the journal *China Tropical Medicine* published an article written by a researcher from the Huizhou Centre for Disease Control and Prevention which criticised the Huizhou City Government's failure to implement the laws concerning occupational health:

"Huizhou has more than 20,000 industrial companies and 1.3 million industrial workers. Among these companies there are at least 4,000 with recognised occupational hazards. However, since 1998 we have only received eight cases of occupational diseases, a figure entirely disproportional to the numbers of factories and workers. There exists a vacuum in the management [of occupational diseases].

Some lower levels of local government administration have been far from neutral in their efforts to attract foreign investment. They allow factories banned by the central or provincial government due to safety and environmental concerns to operate here: factories in sectors such as footwear, gems, batteries, electroplate manufacturing, leather etc. Individual government departments fail to work in accordance with the laws and give operating licences to companies that have been denied permission elsewhere. Companies frequently omit key information when submitting reports to the government. The health department is often unaware of the types of occupational hazards factories pose, and this weakens its ability to prevent occupational diseases as well as monitor occupational health.¹⁴"

As the GP workers' struggle progressed, a common interest between Gold Peak bosses and local officials was to repress it. The workers faced intransigence from management and government alike--sometimes openly, sometimes from behind the scenes. Their aim was to ensure that the workers' struggle for medical care and compensation was obstructed at every turn. Underlying this bias is a phenomenon called 'local protectionism' which first and foremost refers to the considerable income that the Huizhou government derives from Gold

14 http://www.shouxi.net/literature/200611/3117_103083.aspx

Peak's subsidiaries through taxes. Of course, China is certainly not unique in its goal of attracting foreign investment. In China, however, local governments have developed the practice of rewarding civil servants with cash bonuses if they meet investment targets. The Huizhou government has gone so far as to draw up a regulated system of rewards and publishes them on its website. Thus, the income of Huizhou public officials is directly linked to the amount of foreign investment they succeed in attracting to the local economy. The Huizhou Government Information Website has posted a document entitled 'Rules on encouraging foreign businessmen to invest in enterprises in Huizhou' which states:

"In our plan to attract inward investment, work units and individuals making positive and successful contributions will be directly recognised for their advanced work and receive due merit as well as cash rewards. Recorded merits shall become important criteria for promotion of cadres. In attracting inward investment, non-public servants acting as intermediaries in attracting projects involving foreign investment will receive a cash award. Such awards are based on a sliding scale proportional to the value of the investment.¹⁵"

Linking the amount of foreign investment an official may lure with cash rewards is hardly a policy designed to tackle corruption. For all intents and purposes it represents a green light for officials to collude with investors—a process made easier when the local government directly owns many of the enterprises involved. In addition, it is also common for government officials to personally own shares of these enterprises. Given the absence of democratic control, the policy naturally invites inappropriately close collaboration or even collusion between government officials and private capital at the expense of workers. In this case senior officials often have a default bias towards the interests of private investors over workers. We have already noted the close relationship between

15 <http://www.huizhou.gov.cn/tzhzviewArticle.shtml?method=viewArticle&id=2AA9A5E8F1404F8ABA172D158346A1D2> (accessed July 25, 2008).

the Huizhou municipal government, Desay and Gold Peak. We will add some remarks on the personal side of this relationship. As a young man, the former Deputy Mayor of Huizhou, Xu Guang, was first a workshop manager at Desay, later promoted to director of Desay, and finally moved into government as Deputy Mayor, serving until 2006. Zhu Youzhi, who sits on TCL's board of directors, had served the Huizhou government for an extended period as a high ranking official. He was later appointed by Victor Lo to sit on the committee of GP Batteries Industrial Safety Trust Fund.

These relationships help to explain why local officials have been so solicitous toward GP. Local officials and GP have been so close that as soon as workers at Power Pack and Advance Battery went on strike to demand health examinations in early 2004, the local city government immediately established a high-level task force made up of officials from various government departments to deal with cadmium-related issues at the factories. They stationed in the two factories and their task was to stop the strike and stabilise labour relations at the factories. Given the vested interests described above, the task force was never going to facilitate equal dialogue between management and workers. On the contrary, the task force acted to head off future protest as well as identify and isolate organisers. In fact, at a certain point the government task force members and Gold Peak management personnel were more or less interchangeable. For example, Zhang Li was a member of the task force but later appointed as a manager at Power Pack in a job that brought her into close contact with workers. She is despised by the workers and has at no point displayed any empathy for their plight. On one unforgettable occasion she was confronted by angry workers who called her a 'devil'. Zhang Li replied that "devils live for a thousand years but good people die young" (that is, doing good to others is no help to one's own self).

It is worth recalling at this point that the workers' demands were far from radical. They had to go to enormous and courageous lengths – negotiating, striking, and blocking highways – simply to win access to hospital checkups in order to

secure official and accurate medical certificates. As the struggle developed, officials from outside of Huizhou city were forced into becoming involved: the Guangdong provincial government, the provincial Women's Federation, the Guangdong Hospital for the Treatment and Prevention of Occupational Diseases (hereafter Guangdong Hospital) and on up to the central government in Beijing. Finally the Ministry of Health in Beijing sent a group of five specialists to Huizhou to try to 'direct' a suitable solution.

Women Workers: Shaking up Stereotypes

In many mainland reports and papers on migrant workers' rights, the subjects – the workers – are reduced to passive objects. They are always portrayed as victims, facing tragedy and in need of our help and charity. Such appeals are a marked improvement on the sometimes mocking press reports of migrant workers threatening to leap from buildings to demand wage arrears that have appeared in the past.¹⁶ But the 'victim'-style reporting is increasingly flawed in its portrayal of migrant workers – particularly women migrant workers – as weak. It is a stereotype that simply doesn't match reality. Every year, migrant workers stage countless strikes and roadblocks, actions that require enormous courage in China's repressive labour relations regime. Moreover, the Gold Peak struggle has seen the emergence of a core of leaders in which women have featured increasingly prominently. Alongside this core have been large numbers of competent worker activists who have learned many lessons during their struggle. These men and women cannot be written off as mere victims. Among them are capable leaders, good public speakers, organisers and motivators and very brave individuals determined to fight for their rights and interests. Even management at times grudgingly acknowledged the developing skills of the workers. In the early days of the dispute, the factory thought it would be easy to fool these women because they were very naive. But a year later, one of the managers admitted: "We used to think you were just a bunch of bumpkins. Now we know

16 For example, the infamous mixing of English and Chinese phonetics to produce headlines that roughly translate as the 'The Great Leap Show' – *tiao lou xiu* – with the last character *xiu* substituting for the English word 'show'.

you are really smart!”

The two Huizhou factories employed 1,300 and 1,500 workers respectively, who came from different provinces in China. Among them were Hunanese, Sichuanese, and Jiangxi people, as well as locals from Huizhou and other parts of Guangdong province. In many migrants’ struggles, workers are often hampered by hometown or village loyalties sometimes referred to as regionalism. This was not a problem in the Gold Peak struggle. Much more challenging was the familiar problem of persuading workers who believed they had not been directly affected by the cadmium to take part in industrial action.

The workers’ struggle can be divided into two distinct phases. The first and most intense stage was from late 2003 to the end of 2004 when workers in both factories staged eleven strikes, road blocks, and factory gate picket lines, and sent four petitions to the provincial and central government.

The following is a broad chronological sequence of strikes which took place in different departments in the two factories in 2004:

Milling shop workers at Power Pack, early May
Assembly line at Power Pack, 9-18 June
Assembly line at Advance Battery, 14-18 June
Assembly line at Advance Battery, 29 June and 10 July
Packaging department at Advance Battery, 13-15 August
Entire factory of Power Pack, 8-11 September

The second stage began when workers were tricked into resigning in late 2004. From then on striking was no longer a viable tactic. Out of work and beginning to disperse, the workers’ struggle shifted focus. Workers went back to the courts to sue for medical care and win just and dignified levels of compensation through legal action. But from time to time they still had to resort to demonstrating in order to get proper medical check-ups or the compensation required

by law. One of the most important and difficult tasks in this second period was to maintain contact as many workers began to head back to their hometowns or look for new jobs, and would only meet once a year when returning to have their cadmium levels checked.

This book chiefly focuses on the first stage of the struggle.

The first worker to emerge as an excellent organiser was a man called **Liu Youping** who worked at Power Pack. One of his fellow workers recalled:

Liu Youping was one of my best friends who came to the factory in July 2000, one month after I arrived. We were a bit like master and apprentice. The second check-ups [blood tests] were organised in the factory in February 2004, and I immediately told my friend from Hubei [Liu Youping] about the tests as he had already left the factory two or three months earlier. He phoned the factory and they told him he could be included in the check-ups. His test result showed slightly excessive levels of cadmium so the factory then gave him a new job with the factory security team. For Liu it was like starting afresh at the factory on a basic wage of 300 to 400 yuan, but he liked his new job as he only had to put in eight hours a day and had Saturday and Sunday off which gave him plenty of free time. His check-ups in June and July showed no excess cadmium so he left the factory again. I really liked Liu, he's a great guy. When I was in hospital I got really fed up and wanted to leave, and he came to cheer me up.¹⁷

The results of independent check-ups made on 17 workers in May 2004 all showed excessive cadmium levels. Liu Youping was a central figure in this group of 17 workers. Among his workmates he had a good reputation for being active, shrewd, and even-handed. In the early days he did much of the organising. He played a full part in the struggle of the women in the assembly department in May and June 2004, and even took the lead. After he left the factory he often visited hospitalised workers and helped workers to begin organising until someone new took over.

17 Recorded interview with a Power Pack worker.

Women formed the core leadership after Liu left and this fact, along with the durability of the dispute, made the struggle unusual. Most migrant workers' struggles are spontaneous, unorganised, and short-lived, and do not usually have permanent leaders. Nearly all the people who take a lead role in these short struggles are men. But the events at Gold Peak were showing signs of something different: sustainability and organisation. These hopeful signs reflected not only the long term nature of cadmium health problems but also the important role of women line supervisors in the dispute. Many of these workers were relatively well educated, had basic management and leadership experience and enjoyed a level of prestige among the workers. After these supervisors tested positive for abnormal levels of cadmium, they too became targets of management's lies and tricks. They threw their lot in with the workers' struggle, bringing their people and organising skills with them.

Cheng Xiang was an assembly line supervisor at Power Pack, and was one of the 17 employees who first went on strike to demand health checks. She was the chief negotiator among the eight representatives elected by the workers to negotiate with the factory. She played a full role in the struggle for compensation, displaying a systematic and determined character. As well as taking part in negotiations with the factory and government task force, she also helped with compensation claims for several workers with excess cadmium levels who had already left the factory. In August 2004, she led the workers' trip to petition the authorities in Beijing. Before leaving the factory in September, she and other workers organised a lawsuit demanding compensation. She was a key player in this action. Her husband has described Cheng as having a strong and rebellious personality. After returning to her home village for a while, she played a leading role in upholding the rights of fellow villagers in various local issues. As the struggle continued, her ability and knowledge of labour law, labour relations and labour rights improved greatly.

Cao Menghua is clever, capable, experienced, and tenacious. She has a strong personality and worked as a line supervisor. As the cadmium saga unfolded, she

became increasingly disgusted at the factory's trickery and repression. During the month of September 2004 when the first peak of workers unrest took place she became a workers' representative, and took part in the factory strike, the negotiations, and petition to the Huizhou government. She was hospitalised and used this time to increase her knowledge of occupational illnesses and related labour laws and regulations. She put this self-study to use by continuing the struggle for compensation whenever she had the opportunity to talk with factory representatives.

Feisty, and quick-witted, **Li Dan** worked in the milling shop and was one of the first employees admitted to hospital. Like almost all of the Gold Peak workers, launching a dispute against management was completely new territory for Li Dan and she herself fully acknowledges her and her fellow workers' naivety: *"We had so much to understand. Much of this understanding came after things happened to us."* The unfolding of the cadmium poisoning and Gold Peak's behaviour led Li Dan and her fellow workers into a progressively complicated and contracted struggle with their employers. She was to become one of the organisers and representatives for the second group of Power Pack workers that launched a lawsuit against Gold Peak. In Hong Kong she told Mrs. Li, the deputy general manager from Gold Peak, *"We did not ask for this. It is your tricks and lies that have brought us to this point."*

After getting married and having a baby, **Zheng Chunhong** was employed in the assembly department. Although she did not do well at school and was not good with words, she was regarded by her fellow workers as responsible. She became an organiser and chief representative for the second group lawsuit and was also one of the original 17 workers who went on strike to demand check-ups. Although Chunhong often felt weighed down by what had happened to her health, her innate optimism has helped her through. As Chunhong often told us, "Everyday is a new smile."

Jiang Xiaomei started working at the Advance Battery factory after graduating

from junior high school and was promoted to line supervisor in the assembly department. Xiaomei worked at the factory for a long time and was often ill as a result. However, she is an optimist by nature and always had a big smile for everybody. Xiaomei is not especially rebellious by nature and was known for enduring suffering while being reluctant to complain. An uncomplicated woman, she did not draw a dividing line between work and home – also a rural trait – and even took unfinished tasks home with her. Her domestic chores at home and factory workload left her little time to lighten her load by talking with friends and relatives. But her earnest nature and reliable approach to life earned her enormous respect from fellow workers and when she and her fellow workers were forced to leave in early September, she became involved in efforts to get compensation for them and launched a combined lawsuit with workers from Power Pack. Seven representatives were elected for the lawsuit, headed by Jiang Xiaomei.

Chapter Four

One Day *in the* Sweatshop

It was commonly believed in the 1990s that the “information revolution” was causing capitalism to increasingly free itself from material production, as the world became ever more networked and ever more “virtual.” Along with material production, it was said that the working class, was becoming increasingly irrelevant. One visit to the sweatshops on the Chinese mainland, however, reveals the other side of this story. The problem with the above idea is that it only considers the advanced Western countries, and in fact only certain aspects of those countries. It forgets that the “networked world” is itself built on vast amounts of hardware, and that even in the advanced countries there are still tens of millions of production workers. It even more forgets that capitalism is a global system, and that within this system the twenty-first century networked world stands along side and relies on a world of nineteenth-century-style sweatshops. The fact that it is difficult to see this reality is no coincidence: the real producers in the factories—the workers—are made voiceless and forced to become the real “silent majority,” while those with “discursive power” are the bosses and big officials riding on the workers’ backs, who can whitewash the inhumane factory system at their own pleasure. Only after workers’ actions such as strikes or roadblocks is it possible for us to see the bitterness created by such “modern” advancements as “scientific management” and “human resource management.” Until the cadmium poisoning case was revealed, no one doubted the high-sounding words in Gold Peak’s annual company reports from Victor Lo, the company chairman: “[W]e regard the workforce as our most valuable asset. We strive to create an ideal working environment to make employees feel fully valued and appreciated, and enhance their sense of being part of the group.”

This chapter relates workers’ experiences in the Power Pack and Advance Bat-

tery factories, and lets the workers express their own attitudes and feelings about life in the factories. One section was written by a female worker herself, and another is compiled from interviews with two workers, one from each factory. From these two sections, we can feel some of their pains and joys, and see their actual and “spiritual” rebellions against the inhumane conditions they face in the factories. But before turning to the workers’ own narratives we will first give a brief introduction to the working conditions in the two factories, including some facts concerning breaches of the labor law.

Knowing Violations

A GP worker recalled how he was recruited:

Before 2004 (that is, before the cadmium poisoning incident was exposed), we didn't even get to see a contract. We just signed our names on a big piece of paper that had the names of many other workers. Workers didn't get to ask about the contents of the contract, and we didn't get a copy, either. If a worker asked to see the contract, the bosses would say 'They're all the same, you don't need to see it.'

Although workers in the mainland are granted substantial protections under the labor law, it is common knowledge that the law is rarely enforced, and so Power Pack and Advance Battery are not exceptions.

According to the labor law, workers should not work more than 40 hours a week, and should not work more than 36 hours of overtime per week.¹ The workers from Power Pack informed us that this was never the case at the factory:

1 Article 38 of the Labor Law of the People's Republic of China stated: “The employer shall guarantee that its laborers have at least one day off a week.” Article 41 stated: “The employer can prolong work hours due to needs of production or businesses after consultation with its trade union and laborers. The work hours to be prolonged, in general, shall be no longer than one hour a day, or no more than three hours a day if such prolonging is called for due to special reasons and under the condition that the physical health of laborers is guaranteed. The work time to be prolonged shall not exceed, however, 36 hours a month.” <http://www.lawinfochina.com/law/display.asp?id=705>

We work in two shifts. The morning-shift works from 7am until 8pm, without any breaks for water or to go to the bathroom except for the noon to 1 pm break for lunch. In the evening they don't allow any time for workers to eat, so workers can't eat dinner until 8pm when they get off duty. It's even worse for the night-shift workers, who have to work from 8pm to 6:45am the following morning, with only 30 minutes for a 'midnight snack.'

Subtracting meal times, day shift workers are forced to work for 12 hours a day and night shift workers almost as much. On top of this grueling schedule, workers are only given a single one-day break per month. Thus, day-shift workers work 84 hours a week and night-shift workers 77 hours per week. This means that, like workers in most factories in the mainland, Power Pack workers are illegally forced to work overtime.

Although workers are paid hourly wages, they are required to complete daily output assignments.

They assign output quotas in such a way that only high-efficiency workers can handle it, so less efficient workers don't have any time to rest at all."

The quota is so high that we don't even have time to go to the bathroom, let alone wash our hands after work.

Those who do not finish the daily quota are forced to continue working without pay after punching out.

If you don't finish your quota, they deduct your overtime pay. If you don't finish [your morning quota] before noon, you're forced to finish it during the lunch hour [without pay].

In order to finish their quotas on time, some workers take their lunch into the workshop, and eat and drink without leaving their stations. Night-shift workers

also take their meals into the workshop. The Advance Battery factory works in the same way. Some workers told us that this particular violation had potentially devastating consequences for the workers:

The crazy thing is that taking food into the workshop is probably one of the reasons why workers are getting poisoned--but it's not only not prohibited by the factory, the managers actually encourage it because it's the only way night shift workers can finish their quotas.²

As for wages, one veteran worker told us that workers' wages plus additional benefits (such as insurance) in Power Pack were higher than in other factories. In 2004, the monthly wages of a normal worker were over 1000 yuan. Take workers in the milling shop with excessive cadmium levels as an example. They generally have more than four or five years of work experience, most between four and eight years, and have monthly wages from 1200 to 1500 yuan (because of the dusty conditions in the milling shop, they are paid slightly higher wages than others as compensation). The higher wages they received meant that, before September 2004, many workers never considered quitting their jobs and leaving the factory. Some of the women workers in the hospital even told reporters that they were willing to return to the factories to work in order to support their families.

High wages, however, uniformly result from overtime work because base wages are not high, and in fact workers in the two factories were paid less than the minimum legal wage for an extended period. In 2004, the minimum legal wage in Huizhou was 400 yuan per month, but workers at Power Pack were paid a base wage of 380 yuan per month, an obvious violation of the law. Generally, overtime pay is almost two to three times higher than the base wage. By having workers dependent on overtime work to earn a decent wage, employers are able

2 Presentation by workers from Huizhou ABT. See also Xia Xianhu, "Chongqing Migrant Workers Afflicted with Cadmium Poisoning in Guangdong: 65 Victims Sue Today," *Chongqing Chenbao*, Oct. 14, 2004.

to strengthen their power over the workers: those who do not follow orders are not allowed to work overtime.

The factories are all exceedingly calculating with respect to workers' wages. A typical example is that in 2003, in order to reduce the extra wages given to long-term workers, many workers with more than ten years of service at the two factories were simply dismissed. Furthermore, factories used to increase every worker's daily wage by 50 to 80 cents once a year, but over a period of a few years the number of workers receiving wages was sharply reduced: first only half of the workers on a given production line received wage increases, then only 30 percent of the workers, then 20 percent, 10 percent, and finally only 5 percent of the workers were granted wage increases. That is to say that on a production line with fifty workers, the number of workers who would get wage increases was reduced to three. Only "excellent workers" are given increases, such as those who had not asked for leave for the whole year. Power Pack and Advance Battery are the same in this regard. Workers told us that of course, those with a good relationship with their line supervisors are granted pay raises first, while "talkative" workers, namely those who complain about conditions in the factories, are disliked by the management and never get pay rises.³ It was said among the workers that in Advance Battery the wages of workers in the most difficult and dirty positions could be increased, while in Power Pack usually only the supervisor's relatives could get wage increases. Complaints over nepotism in Power Pack played an important role in the subsequent strikes. Furthermore, for the past several years, continuing even after the cadmium poisoning issue was exposed, every time basic wages were increased, workers' subsidies, allowances and bonuses were reduced at the same time. As a result, workers' income was almost unchanged and sometimes reduced. This practice was common in other factories as well. It is not difficult to understand why it was not only the occupational health and safety concerns that compelled workers to strike, and why other issues such as wages played a role as well.

3 Some workers pointed out that it was often the "talkative" workers who were able to spur other workers into action later on.

Although the situations in Power Pack and Advance Battery that we describe above show that their workers are severely exploited, they are by no means the worst cases in mainland China. On the contrary, workers told us that “wages in the factory are relatively high for the area” and “among the top two” in Huizhou. As for national holidays, workers in Power Pack are granted leave, but workers in many other factories have no vacation time for the whole year. Overtime pay at Power Pack was 150% to 200% of the base wage (before 2000, overtime pay for Saturday was 150% of the base wage), but there are many factories that do not pay overtime at all, a clear violation of the labor law. In spite of the fact that workers in Power Pack suffered severe cadmium poisoning due to years of inadequate protections, compared with many other battery factories in the mainland, including large-scale manufacturers, the safety standards in Power Pack were not at all the worst.

Dormitories, Unions and Local Governments

The workers' dormitory at Power Pack is within the factory complex, directly alongside the factory building itself, with the two buildings only a few meters apart. Workers often take their meals back to the dormitory to eat, and can hear the machines whirring nearby as they eat.

The dormitory has five floors, and each floor has eleven rooms. Each room has six bunk beds and normally houses seven or eight workers. There is only one stairwell in the entire building. The showers are in the rear of the building, with around ten shower stalls, though several are usually broken. There are too few showers, and so in the winter when workers need hot water to wash, there is always a long line and some of the workers are forced to wait hours for their turn.

The dormitory houses both the day and night shift workers. When the day shift workers are on their break, there is often enough commotion to disturb the night shift workers. If the night shift workers return early, they will likewise disturb their sleeping coworkers. Each room has two small fans. When the weather is hot the small fans are not enough to cool the large rooms, and the heat be-

comes very uncomfortable. This is especially true of the fifth floor, when during the hot and humid summers many workers choose to lay down mats and sleep on the cement floor. The workers all feel that the dormitory is too noisy, dirty, uncomfortable, and filled with mosquitoes, and they are not able to rest well. Thus many of the workers have managed to find rooms outside of the factory - some of the workers have partners in Huizhou with whom they live in outside apartments, and sometimes several workers from the same village pool their money and rent a room outside together. Workers are charged 45 yuan per month to live in the dormitory, and many choose to live outside the factory to avoid this fee.

There are labor unions in Power Pack and Advance Battery, but as is the case with so-called labor unions in other enterprises in China, they exist as pure formalities set up to satisfy the legal requirement. The chairman of the labor union in Power Pack is none other than the Human Affairs manager of the factory, Chen Jianfen. Who are the members? If you ask workers in Power Pack whether or not they know if there is a union at the factory, most would answer, "No." If the workers do not even know that the union exists, then the union is utterly useless. Actual membership in the so-called union is chosen by the management among line supervisors. "Members" have 0.5% of their wages deducted as union dues, which is used for parties or other activities once or twice a year.

Similarly, in accordance with the law, each factory is equipped with a so-called 'Production Safety Committee'. As with the labor unions, however, they are purely empty organizations which have no practical impact on the actual conditions under which workers work.

While local governments turn a blind eye to factories' failure to comply with labor, safety and other laws, they do often directly involve themselves in factory life, but nearly always in ways favorable to the companies and to the detriment of the workers. Some typical examples concern enforcement of the family planning policy and residence permits. In the mainland, every "work unit," in-

cluding private enterprises, is required to take responsibility for implementing certain programs assigned to them by the government. Family planning is one such program. Since it opened, the Power Pack factory has implemented the family planning policy, under which women are not allowed to have more than one child.

Cao Menghua recalled:

Women who have a second pregnancy are given administrative sanctions: workers are not allowed to work, and line supervisors are demoted to normal workers. The majority of workers feel that this is reasonable, because they feel that there is no reason why one should have a second child when the state forbids it.

Liang Qing is a knowledgeable and capable worker who had a second child while at the factory. Her superiors demoted her and sent her to work in the milling shop for this, but it was generally believed by fellow workers that her demotion was also a result of her being too “lax” in the factory—i.e., not deferential enough to her superiors. After Liang Qing gave the results of her cadmium test to the factory, the managers told her that her results were unimportant, saying that only the “most lax” workers would take that test, and then ignored her. Liang Qing was worried about pressing the issue, as she now had a second baby to care for and her husband was a mechanic at TCL [which also had a close relationship to Gold Peak].

In order to better “manage” the workers, the local government offices of the areas in which the factories reside - i.e., the village committee, sub-district offices or occasionally the higher level district governments - send public order teams to the factories to check residence permits and family planning documents of the workers on a regular basis. These “inspections” have more or less become money making operations for the local officials and public order teams, as they find all manner of excuses to fine the workers. In the Mao era, public order teams were supposed to be local autonomous organizations established for self-protection, and members were to be selected from among the workers themselves

to carry out patrols after working hours. As such, they thus were not to have legal enforcement powers. At least since the 1980s, however, local governments have directly hired people to staff the public order teams and turned them into "professional" organizations with legal enforcement powers, in spite of having no legal or constitutional authority to do so, because they are not regular public employees at all. In fact, the members are basically contract workers largely hired from local idlers or even thugs. The overall quality of these ragtag teams is of course very low. It was just such a public order team that was responsible for the famous beating to death of the student Sun Zhigang in Guangdong in 2003 for not carrying his proper residence permit. This case was not merely an isolated incident, for public order teams frequently abuse their authority enough to cause public outcries. When this happens the local Public Security Bureau tends to shift the blame to the individual team members rather than seeing the problem as a product of the very institution of the "public order team" itself.

To a certain extent one may argue that the public order team as it is now is a by-product of the household registration system, which although relaxed a bit recently still denies permanent city residency rights to people from rural households. The latter are second class citizens whose children do not even enjoy the same right to education as regular city dwellers are entitled to. In order to enforce the institutional discrimination against rural migrants the municipal governments have found it necessary to encourage sub-district governments to reinforce and expand the power of the public order teams. The public order teams and the household registration system compose a powerful instrument to control rural migrant workers.

Cao Menghua told us of how the local government, with the help of its public order teams, colluded with the factory management and harassed workers:

In the year 2000, the Family Planning Office of Xiaojinkou township government came in a van to the factory to catch people. Every pregnant worker had to present her pregnancy permission card, and those without cards were taken to the township office and fined 2000 yuan in 2004. After the workers began protesting over the cad-

mium issue, the Family Planning office came to fine people again. This was clearly done to try to intimidate the workers.

In addition, the village also sent a public order team to check everyone's temporary residence permits. Everyone who did not have a permit or whose permit had expired was fined. They waited until it was time to get off work and then blocked the door of the factory to catch the workers as they tried to leave.

The permits are all handled through the factory. Every worker gives his or her pregnancy permission card and residence permit to the factory, and the factory gives it to the township government to get stamped. If the permit is not accepted (because it has expired or has not gone through the yearly renewal), he or she is fined 100 yuan.

After the cadmium poisoning was reported, officials from the village committee came to the factory and took pictures at the factory gate. They inspected the waste water processing system, which was temporarily turned on for the inspection. It was then declared to everyone in the village that they need not worry, because the waste water is processed before it leaves the factory.

A Day in Power Pack

Li Xiaoyu

(A former assembly line worker at Power Pack)

A) The morning alarm rings

“The bloody bell again” I muttered with my head ruffled up in the quilt. Since starting at Power Pack, sleeping had become my only hobby, and every break became the right time for me to doze. I heard my roommates running back and forth, Chun screaming out, “Who’s seen my uniform?” Feng demanding, “Would you give me back my basin?” Everyone was yelling, accusing, demanding. After a while, when it became quiet, I pulled the quilt away and took a deep breath. My bed curtain was still closed. I stretched and let out a groan.

Then the voice of one of my roommates came crashing down, "You're still in bed?! There are only ten minutes left! You're just asking for trouble!" She had come back for her factory ID and found me still in bed, so she shouted at me to wake me up.

I looked at the clock and was surprised to find that there really were only ten minutes left. I quickly combed my hair with my hands (after starting at Power Pack I cut my lovely long hair so that I could sleep a few extra minutes in the morning), wiped my face with a towel and sprinted to the workshop with my uniform in one hand and a bag in the other. The bag was filled with oversleeves and washed gloves (the factory wanted to pass the ISO14000 environmental standards certification, and in order to save resources and make the most of our materials, we were given one pair of gloves every two days instead of the required one pair per day; we had no choice but to take them to dormitory and wash them ourselves).

B) In the workshop... ..

The bell to start work rang just as I got to my seat. I wiped the sweat off my forehead and noticed the other workers around me already working at their stations - in order to finish their quotas and avoid compulsory overtime, they had come to work early. I really felt sorry for them, and realized how lucky I was.

Compulsory overtime means overtime work without pay. The factory figures that it pays workers by the hour, or more concretely it pays for the amount of products that the workers can produce during working hours, including the time for eating, drinking and going to the bathroom. So in order to increase productivity, the factory reduces the amount of time workers can eat, drink, and go to the bathroom, and sets the amount of products a worker must produce every hour in order to meet the production quota for the day. One of the managers had a saying about productivity: "Productivity can be increased without limit. There

is no so-called productivity ceiling or standard for productivity. The higher the pressure the stronger the drive, and thus the higher the productivity.” Therefore in the assembly department the most important thing is to increase productivity, and if a worker doesn’t increase the amount of products she produces, then she has to continue working after punching out to finish her quota. Of course workers don’t want to punch out if they have to keep working, so the line supervisors take their cards and punches out for them while keeping the worker at her station to keep working.

Some people might wonder if that ever happened to me. It never did. One reason is that I was in charge of turning on the machines,⁴ so if I was angry enough I could cause a slowdown or purposely damage a machine, and fixing it would take an hour or two, during which time the whole production line wouldn’t have any materials. Another reason is that all of the machine operators stick together and no one is willing to work overtime, and we synchronize things so well that there aren’t any opportunities for the managers to take advantage. Even so we were still forced to work overtime twice, but we were still in much better shape than the other workers.

But enough of all that, let’s get back to my story. Just after I put on the face mask given to me by the line supervisor, I saw that my workmate sitting across from me was crying. I was shocked and asked her what was wrong, but she just kept crying and didn’t say a word. Then a workmate nearby told me what had happened.

After SARS broke out in 2003, we were each allocated two 3M masks per week by the line supervisor. When this workmate got her mask, she found it was a little too tight and tried to loosen it, but the tie broke. She asked the line supervisor to trade it for another one, but the line supervisor said, “I don’t have

4 “Turning on the machines” means running the machines themselves rather than cleaning up or processing by hand the semi-finished products produced by the machines. It requires some technique, and gives the worker in charge of it some measure of control over the operation.

any extras. Go ask the general line supervisor for another one." The general line supervisor was a well-known grouch, so the workmate was afraid to ask for a new mask. Later, the general line supervisor passed by, saw that she had not started her machine and asked why. When the workmate said that the tie to her mask was broken, the general line supervisor yelled at her, "How could you be so careless! Do you realize that these masks cost money? And you think you can just waste them!" The workmate then started crying. I felt bad for her, went over to wipe off her tears, and said, "Don't cry over this. If you cry, people will look down on you. Let me see if I can take care of it for you." I went over to the general line supervisor and said, "Ling, would you do me a favor and exchange this for a new one?" The general line supervisor looked at me and said with a sigh, "Look, I can't do anything about it. You know the higher managers are stingy with the masks - the line supervisors get one mask every four days." I said, "Well, you shouldn't be so harsh. We're all migrant workers here. You don't have to act so severely." Later, the general line supervisor went to console the workmate for a while. As for the mask, I came up with a solution - we made a hole in the edge of the mask and strung it together with a piece of elastic. That pretty much solved that issue.

Telling that story always makes me feel bad - is it that looking back on that time touches a raw nerve?

I shouldn't complain too much. Once when I was daydreaming at work (at work I always used to think about all sorts of questions or about books I'd read - my feeling was that I only had to sell my body to the factory, but my thoughts were my own!), suddenly a workmate nearby shouted out "I'm done! I'm done!" I gave her a skeptical glance, and she quickly responded, "It's time - I've got to go." It was the time for her to nurse her baby. Many female workers got married while working at the factory and continued working when pregnant. After a short leave to give birth, many women came back to the factory with their babies and continued working. Every day at set times a family member would bring the baby to the factory gate and the worker would go down to nurse it.

Each time this would take about half an hour, and each day this would add up to about an hour. The production quota for that hour would not be reduced, so the mothers usually had to work during lunch time to finish their assignments.

A year later I found out that cadmium can be transferred from mother to baby through nursing. I then found out that some of the children had gone to the hospital to be tested, and the urine analysis showed that they had unsafe concentrations of cadmium. Please forgive me for being so sentimental, but I feel so bad for the mothers and the innocent little babies.

The morning was very busy and we all felt rushed, and finally the long-awaited bell rang. I temporarily took back my body—all of us were renting out our bodies to the capitalists in exchange for a tiny amount of cash. Here's a funny story: one of my classmates started at this factory just after graduating from school. Although she had left the school, her brain was still stuck in school time. When the bell rang she'd say out loud, "Ah, school's out." Everyone would laugh and she'd look around wondering what was so funny.

C) **Mealtimes... ..**

Let's talk about the meals. We stood in line to get food and were normally very orderly, though inevitably there were occasional problems. The food was so-so, like the cheap food in all of the factories. Then everybody sat at a table with workmates they knew from the same hometown and joked, gossiped, and talked about their problems while eating. We kept our work uniforms on even though we weren't on duty, and at that time had no idea that cadmium powder was stuck to our clothes and falling into our food.

After a little rest at lunchtime, we resumed renting out our bodies in the afternoon. It was pretty much the same story as the morning, and every day was the same. Let me quote the words of one of the line supervisors: "Everyone has a job to do, and we're all in the same boat... .." It was true that every day we were in the same boat. Every day we worked and worked, and who knew how far we

had gone. The difference was that all the line supervisor cared about was our output, but we just wanted to get paid.

D) After work

At 8:00pm we left the workshop exhausted. "Off duty," what a beautiful phrase. It meant that we could put everything aside and do what we wanted to do. First, however, we had to take care of our bodies, and that meant getting some food. They only gave us half an hour to eat dinner, and if you weren't quick enough to be at the front of the queue there would be no good food left. I decided it was better to eat at an outside restaurant. Although it was more expensive, I didn't have to worry about my place in line. While I could have dinner outside, showering was more trouble. There were more than a thousand female workers but only ten shower stalls. Quarreling was unavoidable. In order to avoid getting into quarrels, I usually waited until almost 9:30pm before going down to shower. The hot water was turned off at 9:30, so I was the last one almost every time. What did I do before going to shower? I usually napped in bed while waiting for my friend to call me to go to the shower room together.

After showering, those of us who liked to read would read in bed. Others liked to go out, and would hang out at the North Railway Station Square with friends. Some just went to walk in the park with their boyfriends. There used to always be a lot of people around the factory gate. After the cadmium scandal broke out, there weren't so many people around the factory gate anymore. Why? One person said that before the cadmium scandal girls working at Power Pack were very popular. When they were off work, there would be people on bicycles, motorcycles, and in cars waiting for them. Afterwards, when it was known that many of those beautiful girls were poisoned, they weren't as welcome as before. Although that's a slight exaggeration, many girls were rejected by their boyfriends after it was found out that they had cadmium poisoning. There were more fights between couples. When the girls went back home it was very difficult for them to find husbands. That's really what happened. I was one of the victims.

My Days at the Advance Battery Factory

Jiang Xiaomei

In May 1990, I got a job at the factory. Later I was switched to the assembly department as line supervisor. I did everything and had managed four lines.

My job was in wrapping and packing. Only after I had worked there for five or six years did the factory begin allocating masks. Many of the workers were fifteen or sixteen year olds who came from far away. At the beginning the wage was 4.9 yuan per day, and it increased by a little every year, from 5.2 to 5.8 yuan, then to 6.2 yuan. There were three or four days off every month. Compared with now, it was a much smaller operation at that time, with just two production lines on the factory floor. In 1993 another two production lines were set up with fifty people on each line.

In the beginning everyone's work shifts was fixed, either the day shift or the night shift. The migrant workers all wanted to work on the night shift, because those jobs paid 6 yuan more per day. Later, workers rotated between day shift and night shift.

XXX is an Evil Bitch!

-----Disputes between workers and the employers in the workshop

In 1990, workers in the wrapping and packing department struck two or three times - they were given too much work and they refused to do it. The factory director himself came down and asked them to return to work. Most of the workers came from Sichuan and Hunan. At that time, they had not adapted to the job there, and were impatient.

In early 2000, workers in plates-weighing workshop caused some commotion because while workers in the milling shop were paid an extra 5 yuan per day in compensation because the dust made the work very unpleasant, the plates-weighing group was given no extra pay in spite of the fact that they

thought that their work was no cleaner than that in milling shop. They asked for at least 2 yuan in compensation pay, and said that according to the law the factory should pay double wages on Saturday because it counted as overtime. All the workers on the day shift made a list of requests and gave it to the factory. Ye Guangtian asked the workers to withdraw the requests. Some of the workers got scared and backed down. Those who didn't back down, including electricians in the engineering department, were fired. One worker I know backed down because he still wanted to work there and he thought that his job wasn't so dirty. Workers on the night shift drafted a list of requests, too, but didn't sign it, so none of them were fired.

You could say that the assembly workshops on the third floor were dirtier than the milling shop, with more dust. There weren't many workers in the milling shop. They were relatively free, the foreman was nice to them, the quota was flexible enough that sometimes they could finish two hours early. None of them wanted to work on the third floor.

After the cadmium poisoning issue came to light, these workers gradually lost their willingness to work there.

The wall of the bathroom stall in the workshop used to be as high as a person. Then, the factory director, Xie Qijiang, said that some workers were reading books and slacking off in the bathroom, and that some were throwing defects (beyond the allowed rate in the factory) into the toilet and blocking it up. So they removed the bathroom stall door and the wall was cut to half of its original height. After they did that, how could anyone feel comfortable using the bathroom?

After the cadmium incident they renovated the workshop and fixed it up as if it were a hotel. After we got back from the hospital and went to the factory to attend our meeting with the government officials, we joked with each other that we should go and enjoy the hotel bathroom....

In 1995, the factory produced nickel-metal hydride batteries. Before that time it made both nickel-metal hydride batteries and nickel-cadmium batteries. Later, they built the Power Pack factory to produce nickel-cadmium batteries, so we just produced nickel-metal hydride batteries. In 2002, we went back to the same way as before. Someone from the top management said that the productivity was high in Power Pack and low in Advance Battery. The reason for this was that we at Advance Battery emphasized quality, and the management at Advance Battery tended to give Power Pack easier jobs. We often sent supervisors to teach them as well. If the top management compared the two factories side by side without taking all of this into account, we would come out looking worse. The waste rate in Power Pack was high, and the waste there was piled up and not recorded on the report forms. Our supervisor always said that workers in Power Pack did better and asked us why that was the case. When we went to Power Pack, we asked the workers and line supervisors. They told us that their waste material was poured out by the basin.

In April 2002, Xue Peiqiong was appointed to be workshop director. She wore five masks when coming to the workshop, which was really going too far. A year later she was hospitalized with hepatitis. She said it was very poisonous in the factory, and soon left.

Xue Peiqiong used to constantly measure workers' every movement in order to standardize and increase efficiency. She would come in the morning and stand behind with a stopwatch so she could count your output and see how much you could finish in a minute. Think about it - someone who has just been at work for an hour or two is going to be well rested and full of energy, but the longer you work the more tired you get. Also, if someone is in a good mood one week they're clearly going to do their job better, and when they're in a bad mood that will affect their work, too. But you're always given the same quota every day. No one can always work at the same level for 365 days, can they? She didn't take this into account.

I told the supervisor, Xu Wanjie, what was going on. I told her over and over that the output quotas were too high. It was no use though, and he said that I always took the workers' side.

One day Xue Peiqiong put up a board with the names of the lowest output and highest output workers. Within two or three days, output took off. Of course, no one wanted to have her name on the "lowest output" board. The worker with the highest output would be awarded 100 yuan, while the one with the lowest output would be fined. Who wouldn't want 100 extra yuan? The factory didn't pay any additional money, but just deducted money from some workers and gave it to others and got the output increased. Workers on some of the production lines reached an agreement: no one would produce more than anyone else, but instead everyone would produce the same amount. You would finish 8,000 pieces and I would do exactly the same amount.

In fact, the board was made by Xue Peiqiong's predecessor Director Wang, but he never put it up. Although output increased, quality dropped a lot. When we got off work we had to write so much on the waste report that our hands hurt.

There was also a performance prize. According to the regulations, those in clean jobs shouldn't have been awarded more than 50 yuan, and those on dirty positions not more than 60 yuan, but I would give them more than that every time. Xu Wanjie wasn't happy about that, as she thought I was favoring the workers again.

I took my job as line supervisor very seriously. The line supervisor has to write up report forms, train workers, as well as many other things. Once at a workers' meeting I was asked to go up on the stage and speak, and I was so nervous that I trembled. Every time someone came to inspect the factory we had to change the figures on our reports, otherwise the factory wouldn't pass the inspection. I had to take home a big stack of report forms to change, and

they didn't give me any overtime pay for that. Some line supervisors were very smart in that they gave the report forms to workers to change. Our production line did everything from the wrapping and packing to the pressing. Except for the position making caps, all of the other jobs on the line were very dirty. There were hardly any veteran workers who wanted to work in this production line, because they thought it was too dirty and it was hard to breathe. The married workers didn't mind so much, but the younger girls couldn't take it and usually only worked for a little while before leaving. I was busy training new people all the time. I was stupid because whenever the workers couldn't do something I would go over and do it myself.

The output quotas were too high, and it was very stressful. The line supervisors were very strict with workers. When using the bathroom, workers would write things on the wall like "So-and-so is an evil bitch". Sometimes it was really harsh. The line supervisors sometimes joked with each other, saying, "Did you show up in the paper today?" which meant "Did anyone write nasty things on the bathroom wall about you?" Some time later one of the line supervisors saw that someone had written some nasty things about her and she got very angry. She made all of the workers in her production line write something on a piece of paper so that she could test their handwriting, but she didn't find out who wrote the nasty words about her. After that, there was no more writing on the bathroom wall.

In future if we work in factories, we want to serve as workers, and not line supervisors. Of course, it's not easy for people our age to find a good job.

The Office staff looked down on the workers

In the past, the factory could hire workers easily. Especially after the Spring Festival, sometimes more than a thousand people came to apply for work and the whole yard would be full of applicants. Some of them were brought in by the office managers or customs officials. Some of the people brought in this way were incompetent, but we couldn't do anything about it because of their

high connections in the factory.

The human affairs department is responsible for recruiting new workers. Some people in that department would ask for an "recommendation fee" from the job applicants. There was a girl on my production line who was not able to do the work regardless of how I taught her. I told her that this kind of job was not suitable for her. She pleaded with me, and said that if she lost the job she would lose the "recommendation fee"⁵ she paid to get the job in the first place. She had given 800 yuan to someone in the human affairs department. I stormed over to the office and told the human affairs staff that whoever took the 800 yuan from the girl should give the money back, because it wasn't easy for a worker to earn 800 yuan.⁶

The office staff looked down on the workers in the factory and always tried to order us around. I was very familiar with the people in the human affairs department, so I wasn't afraid to speak to them like that. Two days later, the girl thanked me and told me that her introduction fee was returned to her.

At the end of 2003, Xu Wanjie said that the Labor Law had changed and workers with more than ten years of experience could be fired without any compensation. More than fifty people were fired by the factory, including people from engineering department, those that didn't perform well, and some who had a lot of experience. About six or seven people in the engineering department were fired, all of whom had served the factory for eight or nine years. All of those people were in their 40s, and it was going to be very difficult for them to find new jobs. One worker started trembling after being fired. He had been afraid of being fired from the beginning. His family was poor, and he was trying to earn money to build a new house (in his home village) and support

5 It is the literal translation of "jieshaofei", in fact a bribe. The practice to pay bribe in order to get a job is very common in Guangdong factories.

6 Workers told us that during the strike period, new workers for the production lines on the third floor did also paid introduction fees of 1,000 yuan, and in the end because of the strike new workers left the factory before they had even worked two months. Their introduction fees were never repaid.

his kids. His wife dominated him, and she would bite his head off when she found out what happened. His pay was not high and close to mine. For a man, that was not a high wage. He was really afraid the whole time, and it turned out that he was made into a victim in the end.

At that time the Desay and TCL factories did the same thing as ours: workers with more than ten years of work experience were just fired. Those employees asked for compensation, and I heard that they won finally.

The factory director changed frequently. The higher-ups were afraid that if a person served as factory director for too long, he would start develop close relations with the employees and when he resigns he'd take the employees with him and leave (for other factory). The last factory director was a former product manager, and this happened to him after he'd been factory director for only a year. I guess he counted as unlucky.

At the end of 2003, the Gold Peak Group took over the Modern Battery [*Xinshidai* or “New Era” in Chinese - ed.] factory. In early 2004 when we went to that factory to arrange a celebration, we sang “Entering a New Era.” Before long, the Advance Battery was closed.