



An imprint of Autumn House Press.

Labor Unions in U.S. and China

By [Karen Zhang](#)

My first understanding of a union strike in the United States came last year when I flipped on the TV station and saw dozens of public school teachers in Chicago picketing their school.

Later, a hundred or so Walmart employees went on strike outside Washington, DC, dodging cars and shopping trolleys until they stood face-to-face with a shop manager. Just about the same time, workers of the 85-year-old Hostess Brands, the bankrupt maker of Twinkies snack cakes, also launched a strike against salary and benefit cuts.

Recently, confrontations between workers and employers appear to be sharper and more frequent in China as well. But independent labor unions are almost non-existent in China. The Chinese so-called national trade union is state-controlled. The Chinese government doesn't allow unions with full legal independence from the national trade union. Worker strikes are illegal.

In America, labor unions play an important role in protecting employees' labor rights. Take the teachers union in Chicago, for example. When the strike happened, even the mayor couldn't utilize his power to stop the protest. He could appeal in public to end the strike but not to suppress by force, as the Chinese authorities would have done. Sadly, the Chinese government can command the police force anytime to prevent any form of worker strikes from happening.

I have been told teachers unions across America bear significant responsibility. Most public school teachers are associated with the teacher union. Perhaps it is one of the few strong unions in the country. According to a news report, as the American economy has shifted from heavy industry to services which are more mobile, union membership has fallen, from 24% of private-sector workers in 1973 to a mere 7% in 2011. Yet the unions still have considerable power among government workers. The politicians who negotiate wage deals with public-sector unions are often funded by the same unions. This partly explains why America's municipal finances are a mess.

It has been a long-standing practice for Walmart to discourage its workers from unionizing. However, the mega-retailer has made an exception to allow employee

unions in China. As I said earlier, all labor unions are associated with the national trade union, which is state-controlled. It is obvious that Walmart's acceptance of government-sponsored unions is to maintain a good relation with the Chinese government. After all, who wants to miss a lion's share in an economic power house, which has become the world's second-biggest economy, overtaking Japan and following the US?

Filed under: [Prose](#), [Songyi Zhang's America](#)

© 2020 [Coal Hill Review](#)

<https://coalhillreview.com/labor-unions-in-u-s-and-china/>
