

China makes strides with environmental reform, but has long way to go on labor

T85

(Abridged from) *The Guardian*, 4 May 2015

As the world's largest country by population, the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, and the world's biggest manufacturer, China has long faced global scrutiny for its social and environmental practices. Chinese manufacturers, in particular, face pressure from Chinese citizens, activists and business leaders, as well as from Western companies trying to improve their supply chains.

Perhaps the most influential citizen-led group is the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs (IPEA), founded in 2006 by journalist-turned-environmental advocate Ma Jun. The group's purpose is to shine a light on pollution in China. By making official pollution data easily available to the public, Ma has made it possible for people to take action in their communities, and has made it nearly impossible for polluters to hide.

Among the IPEA's work is the China Pollution Map, a database that allows users to search for pollution violations by company name, and the Green Choice Alliance, an NGO network that lobbies multinational companies to help reduce pollution from their Chinese suppliers.

The labor and human rights issues China faces are so well-known they have become a cliché: long hours, hazardous working conditions, low wages and limited – or nonexistent – worker protections. But just as it took years for the plight of Chinese laborers to become widely known in the West, the reforms taking place are also speeding ahead of public perception.

Years of work from labor rights advocates including China Labor Watch, the China Collective Bargaining Forum, and the China Labour Bulletin, among many others, have resulted in a workforce that has grown more empowered to demand fair pay and better conditions.

There are innumerable ways in which China casts a shadow, influencing its neighbors and the entire world. Many of the most obvious ways are negative: water woes, pollution drift, dirty energy. But China has begun what appears to be an about-face on key global environmental issues, and with its size and influence, it also has an opportunity to be a role model for the world – and to spur major changes with its market power. If China grows a domestic market for green products, for instance, suppliers around the world will certainly rush to help fill it.

Last fall, China made a groundbreaking commitment to reach peak emissions no later than 2030, and Beijing has pledged to end its use of coal by 2020. And China has gone much further than simply serving as the manufacturing heart of the global solar boom: the country has for the past three years been setting a blistering pace for new solar installations. In the first quarter of 2015, China installed solar capacity equal to France's entire output, which in addition to dramatically lowering emissions helps to further build economies of scale in solar manufacturing and expand solar's reach.

Despite the many benefits of China's green transition, a potential downside waits in the wings: as Chinese workers successfully improve their livelihoods, one of the most challenging reverberations may be the spread of cheap labor practices to other developing countries.

Cheap labor and lax regulations may fade away in China, but there are plenty of markets that can help with companies still engaged in the global race to the bottom. In other words, the same forces that brought jobs to China may well send them away.

Among the markets emerging for cheap manufacturing labor are Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam and even Myanmar. As low-cost manufacturing shifts away from China, will labor and environmental advocates lose all the progress made in China over the last 15 years and have to begin anew in each of these countries? Or can these new host countries learn lessons from China's evolution and chart a better course to sustainable development?