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Research on labour NGOs (LNGOs) or worker centers in democratic regimes highlight their contribution to organizing workers collectively in the context of declining union membership, economic restructuring, massive transnational migration and increasing union suppression (Narro 2005; Fine 2006, 2011; McKay 2006; Hyde 2005). For example, in the US worker centers “have had some significant organizing and public policy success and have placed labour standard enforcement on the public policy agenda at the state and national levels” (Fine 2011: 627). In Philippines labour NGOs’ organizing effort has led to “widespread union organizing” in some special economic zones and the surrounding areas (McKay 2006: 49). Drawing on the case of China, this article fills in the intellectual gap regarding the role of LNGOs in workers collective resistance under authoritarian regimes.

It illustrates that starting from 2010 increasingly more LNGOs in China have proactively engaged into workers’ concerted actions, targeting four major areas: strengthening and democratizing workers’ organization; nurturing worker-leaders; transferring skills, knowledge and experience crucial for labour activism; establishing horizontal and vertical labour solidarity. However, LNGOs have been facing tremendous challenges to perform their new role because of the lack of social and political recognition, the monopolized representational status of All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), and escalating political suppression under the Xi Jinping regime.

This article draws on three sources of data. First, from 2012 and 2016 I interviewed 35 staff from 16 LNGOs to learn about the missions, goals, activities and working strategies of different Chinese LNGOs. I also interviewed 50 migrant workers to find out their perception of LNGOs. Second, since 2010 I conducted participant observations of LNGOs in PRD, complemented by fieldwork in Beijing and other parts of the country. I observed how LNGOs handled labour collective disputes in six cases and collected data on another ten workers’ collective fight. Furthermore, I joined worker meetings organized by LNGOs, their visits to work injury victims

in hospitals, outreach activities in industrial zones, staff meetings, retreat meetings, training for worker-activists, and so forth. Third, I conducted archival research to analyze documents, leaflets, letters, reports, and online material produced by LNGOs.