

**Trade union reform and the development of democracy at grassroots level in China
— A case study on direct trade union elections in private enterprises**

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Abstract: Democratic elections and trade unions have always been an important issue in the development of China's grassroots democracy. In the past few years workers and staff in some private enterprises – including foreign-funded or privately-owned companies in the coastal provinces where the economy is more developed -- have set up independent trade unions through direct elections. This is a new trend and follows moves towards self-governance in villages and cities. It implies the emergence of a new force to defend workers' interests and coordinate labour relations, and reveals a reflection of new developments in China's grassroots democracy. This article, with some case studies of several union elections in private enterprises from a number of regions in 2003, analyses the phenomenon of direct elections and their significance in trade union reform within private companies. Depending on how the unions are created, i.e. whether there is local government or official trade union intervention, their establishment may be divided into three categories: consultative between labour and capital, government-led and driven by external forces. The case studies have shown that the creation of trade unions by elections in private companies not only answers the needs of workers to defend their own interests, but also contributes to the coordination of labour relations and the stability of local society. Consequently they shed light on the direction of the reforms and the development of China's trade union organisations. They reveal the progress of grassroots democracy from the rural areas to the urban ones. But union elections are still limited to the private sector and the trade union organisations in state-owned enterprises, public institutions and government departments still follow former practices. We should, therefore, pay more attention to the reform and improvement of government-run trade unions, and at the same time continue to encourage and support the development of direct elections in private enterprises.

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