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Globalisation, national transformation and workers' rights: An analysis of Chinese labour within the global economy (ESRC Standard Grant: RES-062-23-2777, £275k)

The current restructuring in the People's Republic of China (PRC) is of phenomenal importance to the global economy. Millions of workers are added to the global workforce and it is cheap labour, which makes the PRC so attractive for foreign direct investment (FDI). Unsurprisingly, it is workers, who are most under pressure as a result. Chinese workers often work in conditions of super-exploitation, while workers elsewhere either become unemployed, because production is moved to the PRC, or they are pressured into accepting lower wages and worse working conditions through the threat of production transfer to China.

To date, research has been conducted on the new Chinese production structures, the role of the Chinese state in these transformations, as well as China's changing role in the global economy. Nevertheless, neither have workers been at the centre of these studies, nor has it been attempted to combine an analysis across all three levels of activity.

Prof. Bieler and Dr. Lee will investigate the role of Chinese labour within these structural changes at the production, national and international level. They will analyse to what extent trade unions and NGOs have been able to protect the interests of Chinese workers within China and through cooperation with international labour organizations.

Methodologically, this project will draw on existing data such as FDI flows and GDP levels, semi-structured interviews with workers and managers, representatives of the official Chinese trade union, informal labour organisations, the Chinese government, the International Trade Union Confederation and the International Labour Organization. Official documents of these organizations will also be consulted.