Who's Afraid of Li Qiang?

Li China is the world's factory, an unassuming political religon in New York City cap by the closest thing we have to its union leader.

BY ANDREW ROY | MAY 2, 2016

Li Qiang
Illustration by Hugh Kenderdine

Li Qiang didn't expect the McDonald's executives would fly in New York to see him. It was 2005, and the 29-year-old political refugee from China had just released his first report on China Labor Watch, the labor rights organization he founded. The report was the Marcia, a company where workers in Dongguan, China, produced toys for McDonald's, Hallmark and Disney. It referred a two-year investigation that Li, a former Marxist lecture worker himself, had orchestrated with his interview team.

With detailed evidence, it found that employees were required to work for 120 consecutive days before getting one day off, that up to 20 of them were crammed into one dormitory room, and that the average salary, after required deductions, was just 15 cents per hour. Li had also interviewed workers who had been beaten by their supervisors, and he had found that the average age of workers was 16, and that many were "very young." Workers were "very well have some level of chronic disease."

Li put the report online but did not publicize it much, so he was surprised when Jean Kavo, the Hong Kong-based NGO's vice-chair, called to say that he and his colleagues were in town.

"I thought, McDonald's is such a huge company. Why are they coming to meet with me?" Li recalled recently.

Li initially were seated at his desk, among boxes and stacks of office supplies, in his small Manhattan office near Penn Station. Two calculators hung on the wall, neither of them reflecting the current month, and a factory ticket was taped to a cubicle. Now 40 years old, Li's thick hair is greying and, between his solid amateur and square glasses, it can be difficult to see the troubled stress that had been in his little eyes.

Kavo, the Hong Kong-based NGO's vice-chair, and Li's colleagues, in turn, were impressed with Li's work. Kavo, who had worked for years in the Hong Kong-based NGO, said, "Li Qiang's report was very well done."

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BY AMBREEN ALI

Amazon, Apple, and many other household brands, it turns out. Li, an unassuming political refugee in New York City, has become a thorn in the side of multinational corporations by exposing the poor working conditions and often illegal labor practices inside the Chinese factories where they source their products.

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