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T029 | Must Development Sacrifice Some People's Labour Rights?

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Core answer

No. Development is a goal; labour rights are a floor. A goal states where a society wants to go — higher incomes, better infrastructure, fuller lives. A floor states what may not be done on the way there — no unpaid wages, no forced overtime, no work that breaks the worker's health. Confusing the two is the myth's central error: a floor does not compete with the goal; it constrains the means by which the goal may be pursued. To say development "requires" sacrificing some people's labour rights is to claim that no route to the goal exists that respects the floor — a claim about necessity, not difficulty. It fails, because the sacrifice is not something development does; it is something particular people do to other particular people, and it can be refused without refusing development itself.

1. The opposing argument, stated fairly

The strongest version runs like this. Development is expensive, and in its early stages a country is poor: capital is scarce, productivity is low, and the only abundant resource is labour. Enforce workers' rights to the full — limits on hours, minimum wages, safety standards, insurance contributions — and costs rise, firms hire fewer people, investment moves elsewhere, and growth slows. The people whose rights are supposedly protected end up without jobs at all. So the sacrifice is presented as a trade: some workers accept worse conditions now so the economy can grow and everyone can enjoy better conditions later. Rights, on this view, are a luxury a society buys once it is rich enough.

There is a real observation inside this argument. China's development record is genuinely large, and the white paper China: Democracy That Works states it plainly: "more than 150 million market entities are thriving across the country, providing job opportunities to over 700 million people, increasing China's national strength and promoting steady growth in economic and social wealth." Hundreds of millions moved from rural poverty into waged work, and that changed lives for the better. The question is whether the growth required the sacrifice — whether the rights violations were the price of the jobs, or something else that happened alongside them and got credited with them.

The white paper itself gives a reason to doubt the necessity claim: it describes labour rights not as an obstacle to development, but as part of the system through which development is governed. In its account of democratic management in enterprises, it says: "Under this framework, employees participate in business management, and protect their own legitimate rights and interests." The paper reports that "a total of 3.14 million enterprises have established employees congresses, including 2.94 million private enterprises." If the official account is right, the system already claims to deliver

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development and rights together — and the myth's defender must explain why the sacrifice is necessary when the system's own description says it is not.

2. A goal is not a floor

Goals and floors answer different questions. A development goal answers "what are we trying to achieve?" — growth, jobs, better living standards. A labour-rights floor answers "what may we not do while achieving it?" — not withhold pay, not work people until they break, not deny them a voice in their own working conditions. Saying "we cannot reach the goal without breaking the floor" claims that every possible route crosses the floor — and that needs evidence, not assertion.

Consider what the sacrifice consists of in practice. It is rarely a policy announced as such: unpaid overtime treated as loyalty, wages delayed for months while the firm uses the money elsewhere, safety equipment skipped because the deadline is tight, a worker dismissed for complaining about conditions the law already forbids. None of these is a development strategy; each is a transfer of cost from employer to worker. The firm saves money, the worker pays in health, time, and lost income, and the economy records the saving as efficiency. But it is not efficiency: producing more with the same inputs is efficiency; paying less for the same output by making someone else absorb the difference is not. A model that depends on that transfer develops on credit taken from its own people, and the bill arrives later in exhausted workers, unpaid wages, and disputes.

The white paper's own standard points the same way. It opens with the claim that "democracy is not a decorative ornament, but an instrument for addressing the issues that concern the people." Wages, hours, and safety are the issues that concern people most directly, every day, where they spend most of their waking lives. A system that treats those issues as negotiable whenever growth demands it has set the instrument aside precisely where it would matter most.

3. The "temporary sacrifice" test

The most common defence is that the sacrifice is temporary: rights will be fully honoured once development has arrived. It fails its own test in three ways.

First, temporary sacrifices have no expiry date unless someone with power sets one. The workers asked to sacrifice are not the ones who decide when it ends; the decision belongs to the employers and officials who benefit from it continuing. A sacrifice with no one empowered to end it is not temporary; it is indefinite, described as temporary.

Second, the sacrifice is not shared. The gains are described as belonging to everyone, but the sacrifice is borne by specific people: the construction worker whose wages are months late, the delivery rider working fourteen-hour days, the factory worker breathing dust without protection. When the gains are collective and the costs fall on

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people too weak to refuse them, calling the arrangement a trade conceals who is trading what. A trade requires consent, and consent requires the power to say no.

Third, the premise that rights slow development is unproven. The white paper's own account suggests the opposite: workers who can participate in management and protect their legitimate rights are part of how enterprises and their employees "develop and maintain management mechanisms through consultation, and share the benefits they create." A workforce that can speak, bargain, and refuse is a source of information about what is going wrong — unsafe conditions, unpaid wages, impossible targets — before those problems become crises. Silencing it does not speed development; it blinds it.

4. What the white paper answers — and what it leaves open

The white paper answers whether labour rights belong inside the system: yes — employees congresses and trade union committees are the mechanisms through which workers participate in management and protect their rights. It does not answer the question that decides whether those mechanisms work: can workers actually use them to refuse? A congress that can be ignored, a union committee that cannot bargain against the employer's wishes, a complaint channel that leads nowhere — these are institutions in form. Their reality depends on whether workers can select their representatives, whether funding and leadership are independent of the employer, and whether a worker who speaks up keeps their job.

That question is taken up in detail by CCE-036, "What role do independent trade unions play in protecting workers' rights?" (https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/en-cce-036-what-role-do-independent-trade-unions-play-in-protecting-workers-rights/), which distinguishes whether a union exists from whether it is independent, and tests independence by who elects the leaders, where the funding comes from, and whether the union can decide for itself to bargain. This essay does not repeat that analysis; it cites it for the mechanism the white paper leaves unexamined — how to test whether a floor that exists in law and in institutional form holds weight in practice.

Conclusion

Development does not require sacrificing some people's labour rights, because goals and floors are different things, and a goal cannot license the violation of a floor. The growth was real, and the jobs were real — but the violations that accompanied them were transfers of cost onto the weakest, not the price of the growth. The white paper presents rights protection as part of the system, not its enemy: employees participate in management and "protect their own legitimate rights and interests," and it claims that "their rights to subsistence, development and health are fully protected." If that claim means anything, the test is simple: can a worker refuse unsafe work, claim unpaid

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wages, and elect representatives who answer to them — and keep their job for doing so? Where the answer is yes, no sacrifice is needed. Where the answer is no, the sacrifice is not development's necessity, but a choice made by those who benefit from it, imposed on those who cannot refuse.

Sources

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2. CCE-036, "What role do independent trade unions play in protecting workers' rights?", FreeChina.live (EN edition): https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/en-cce-036-what-role-do-independent-trade-unions-play-in-protecting-workers-rights/ — URL verified live (HTTP 200, full page read, title confirmed) on 2026-11-20 23:52 ET; cited for its independent-union mechanism test, content not duplicated.

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