

Mass protests in China point to sharp social tensions

By John Chan
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A wave of militant urban protests has erupted in China over the past month against official corruption, social inequality and the destruction of jobs.

On October 18, the brutal assault of a worker by a government official sparked a riot in Wangzhou, a city in the southwestern province of Sichuan. According to some estimates, up to 80,000 workers and unemployed were involved in a night of clashes and confrontations with thousands of police. Paramilitary units were eventually called in from neighbouring cities to restore order.

The incident that provoked the unrest is a graphic example of the contempt China's state bureaucracy and capitalist elite has for the working class—especially the millions of so-called migrant workers who have moved from the countryside to the cities in search of jobs.

According to accounts on the Internet, a worker, weighed down with a load of goods across his back, accidentally bumped into the wife of a local taxation bureau director. As he attempted to apologise, the official knocked him to the ground. In front of dozens of stunned onlookers, the official beat the man with a pole, breaking his leg. With the worker lying in agony, the official then proceeded to boast to the crowd that he could have him killed if he wanted. At one point, he offered spectators 20 yuan if they would slap the injured man's face.

Police, who arrived as the assault was unfolding, shook hands with the official and made clear he would not be arrested. Outraged workers attempted to detain the bureaucrat but he was secreted away by the police.

News of the incident spread quickly throughout the city's working class districts. By late afternoon, tens of thousands of local residents had rallied outside the Wangzhou city government offices, chanting "hand over the attackers", "punish the attackers" and "for justice of the injured".

Workers pelted the riot police protecting the building with rocks and smashed the glass entrance. Police cars were set ablaze. According to the *Asia Times*: "The character of the demonstration changed from a fight for justice to the expression of anger to the government." As night fell, thousands of police and paramilitary personnel were deployed to restore order, firing tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the demonstration. Street battles continued until midnight.

The Chinese government attempted to downplay the incident, telling the media that a "misunderstanding" had caused the revolt and that the disturbances only involved "a few illegal elements". The underlying causes of the riot, however, are obvious.

Some 250,000 people who were evicted from their villages to make way for the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River were forcibly relocated to the area, which already had high unemployment. Many of the migrants have been unable to find jobs and are forced to live on a 70-80 yuan monthly "living allowance" (\$US9-10) paid by the government. This payment for the Three Gorges refugees, however, is scheduled to finish in 2005. On top of the poverty and deprivation, the displaced villagers are treated with contempt by the state bureaucracy and subjected to police harassment. The simmering tensions eventually expressed themselves in an explosive fashion.

Broader unrest

Discontent has erupted in other Chinese industrial cities this month. The reported protests, however, are likely to be the tip of the iceberg.

According to Associated Press, 5,000 retirees from a major state-owned textile factory, many of them women, protested in Bengbu city, in eastern Anhui province on October 22, to demand an increase in the poverty-level pension. Thousands of sympathisers joined them in the streets, forming a kilometre-long demonstration that blocked all traffic into the city. Riot police were initially deployed but they were withdrawn out of government concerns that any repression would trigger a Wangzhou-style riot. Several officials who mistakenly entered the protest area abandoned their cars and fled on foot, fearing that workers would attack them.

The retired workers only receive a monthly pension of 400-500 yuan (\$US50-60). With inflation running at a seven-year high of 5.2 percent, they cannot make ends meet. In addition, many of the retirees have serious work-related injuries or medical conditions. Conditions in China's textile factories are so bad they are commonly referred to as "coal mines on the surface". Every year thousands of miners and textile workers are killed or maimed in industrial accidents.

The demonstration was organised in the hope that Chinese

premier Wen Jiabao, who was rumoured to be attending the opening ceremony of a local market, would listen to their demands. Instead of receiving sympathy, however, a number of the retirees were arrested as they distributed leaflets outlining their grievances.

On October 18, hundreds of employees from the state-owned Jining Department Store protested in Jining City in eastern Shandong province against the low wages and extended hours they are being forced to work after the company was restructured. As in Bengbu, thousands of other workers joined the demonstration in solidarity with their demands.

Nearly 7,000 workers from the state-owned Tianwang Textile Factory in Xianyang city, Shaanxi province, have occupied the factory since September 14 in protest against the takeover of the company by the Hong Kong based China Resources.

The company sacked the entire workforce and demanded all future employees sign a new contract on lower wages. The workers were also forced to sell their shares in the firm to the new owners.

The occupation has received mass support in the area. On September 18, 1,000 police sent to evict the occupying workers were driven back by a crowd of thousands of people who rallied outside the factory. Protestors sang the *Internationale* and other revolutionary songs.

On September 13, 1,000 employees from Shaanxi Precision Alloy held a four-day traffic blockade to protest the privatisation of the state-owned company. Workers demanded an investigation into missing assets and raised banners such as “defend state-owned assets to death”, “children want school, elders want food, we want wages”, “we want our fruits of labour back” and “break the control of ideas”.

Government officials have responded to each of these incidents with worthless assurances that the workers’ grievances would be given attention. But the reality is that the Beijing Stalinist regime, in line with its commitments to the World Trade Organisation, is accelerating free market restructuring throughout China.

The shutdown and privatisation of state-owned enterprises in 1990s wiped out millions of jobs, and eliminated subsidised housing, pensions and health care. The new leadership of President Hu Jintao has announced a firesale of the remaining 190,000 state-owned enterprises, with only 190 companies remaining in government hands.

The growing working class protests are in direct response to this policy. Robin Munro, research director of the Hong Kong-based *China Labour Bulletin*, told *Bloomberg News* on October 26: “Protests like these [the recent incidents] are happening all over. We expect many, many more as the wave of privatisation of state-owned companies takes off.”

Class tensions are also intensifying in coastal province export zones, where foreign firms brutally exploit tens of millions of Chinese workers. With prices for oil and raw materials soaring in recent months, thousands of sweatshops in these areas are

demanding that workers accept lower pay and longer hours in order to maintain profit margins.

On October 10, 3,000 workers from a Hong Kong-based electronic factory producing CDs in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in Guangdong province protested on the main highway over their low wages, disrupting city traffic for four hours. The company pays as little as 230 yuan (\$US26) a month for 12-hour working days, compared to the official minimum wage of 610 yuan. Two young female workers and five supporters were arrested.

Five thousand striking employees in Dongguan, another major Guangdong manufacturing city, clashed with 500 anti-riot police officers on October 6. The strike was over substandard food served to workers in the Japanese-owned printing factory. Dozens of workers were arrested or injured and a police car destroyed.

The growing class tensions underscore the reasons for the transfer of control of the Chinese military from former president Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao at last month’s Communist Party central committee plenum. The new leadership is dependent on the armed forces to deal with social unrest.

Calls are being made in Chinese ruling circles for a build-up of paramilitary and police numbers. In an interview with state-controlled China Central Television on October 17, Public Security Minister Zhou Yongkang declared that police numbers were “insufficient” and “could not win” where demonstrators vastly outnumbered them.

Beijing’s greatest fear is the massive growth of the Chinese working class, both numerically and in terms of its social weight, over the past two decades. The regime has 1.7 million police, one million paramilitary police and two million troops in the Peoples Liberation Army, to control a population of 1.4 billion. More than 110 Chinese cities now have over one million residents.

Workers’ leaders continue to be targeted for arrest in an attempt to intimidate the population. The most recent detentions involve two female workers, Liu Meifeng and Ding Xiulan, from a former state-owned Funing County Textile Factory in Jiangsu Province. After leading 3,000 workers in a month-long struggle against layoffs, women were seized on October 20 at a public meeting organised by the government in Yancheng city. They have been charged with “disturbing the social order”—a political crime that carries lengthy prison terms.

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