

Thousands protest in central China against proposed waste incinerator

By Robert Campion
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Thousands demonstrated in the central Chinese city of Wuhan recently in a week-long protest to denounce a planned garbage incinerator. The Chinese government mobilised police to quash the protests while, at the same time, mass demonstrations were continuing in Hong Kong.

The Wuhan protests began on June 28, triggered by local government plans to establish the waste incinerator in densely-populated Yangluo in the Xinzhou district. While authorities claimed that a location for the incinerator had not yet been approved, this did little to assuage the fears of residents. As many as 10,000 people marched that weekend to voice their opposition.

The suspected site is close to housing, surrounded by 300,000 residents and two universities within a three-kilometre radius. According to reports, the protest was violently broken up by over 1,000 police, who beat and arrested demonstrators, including the elderly. According to protesters, those detained were released a few days later.

Assurances from the local government that the incinerator would not be installed without further environmental studies and community approval were met with deep distrust. Smaller protests continued on July 1 and 2, then 10,000 demonstrators defiantly marched back onto the streets on July 3 for two days. Protesters chanted “give us back the green mountains and clear waters” and “garbage burning plant get lost from Yangluo.”

The local government forced businesses to close at 6 p.m. on July 4 in an effort to remove protesters from the streets. The mobile phone network was also disabled. According to reports, around 1,000 riot police returned, armed with helmets, shields and batons, as well as an armoured car, to disperse the demonstrations

that night. Video footage posted onto Twitter and YouTube shows police riot squads violently suppressing residents in an effort to intimidate and disperse the movement.

On July 9, the state-owned *Global Times* reported that authorities “vowed the project would not begin without residents’ approval.” Protests seem to have stopped, but according to locals, a heavy police presence remains in the city.

Wuhan is a city of ten million people. The proposed plant stands to become the 6th such incinerator in the city. The Xinzhou district is also the site of a large landfill. Local residents complained that in summer months the air is so foul that they close their windows to get away from the smell, which still prevents them from getting sleep.

One 24-year-old protester in Yangluo told the *South China Morning Post*: “For years we had to put up with the disgusting smell of the garbage burial site, and we were all glad when we heard it would end next year.” He was referring to government announcements that the landfill would be replaced with a public park. “All of a sudden, the park is gone and a garbage burning site will be put there. Nobody can bear it.”

In addition, previous plants have produced toxic emissions that lead to lung disease, leukaemia and cancer. In 2013, China’s state broadcaster CCTV reported that the five existing incinerators in Wuhan were substandard and emitted dangerous pollutants.

A study in 2015 by the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health found that none of the incinerator plants operating in Wuhan passed an environmental impact assessment. This made it clear that the government had done nothing in the two years since the CCTV report in 2013. In similar fashion, incinerators have been placed near residential

areas without public consultation, and routinely flout waste disposal standards.

Since the restoration of capitalism, beginning in the 1970s, China's economic growth has come at the direct expense of safety and the environment, producing deep grievances in the working class. One waste management disaster in Shenzhen in 2015 led to the deaths of at least 73 people. A mountain of construction waste and debris collapsed near workers' living quarters. In 2017, residents of Qingyuan, Guangdong province, protested against a proposed waste incinerator, forcing the government to halt its construction plans.

Caixin, a Chinese business journal, commented in January that “glaring falsifications and outright corruption persist in some of China's fundamental environmental monitoring data.” It explained that the situation had been further compounded since 2015 by the privatisation of environmental testing operations, which “has since become an enormous and lucrative industry.” Testing is either not carried out, or poorly conducted, or companies simply offer bribes in order to pass safety checks they would otherwise fail.

Beijing is deeply fearful that social unrest will explode across China, much as it already has in Hong Kong. Throughout China, workers, peasants, and youth are facing similar attacks on social and working conditions. Hundreds of thousands in Hong Kong lack access to safe, affordable, and clean housing, much like in Wuhan. This is just one underlying factor in driving the intensity of the Hong Kong demonstrations.

The protests in Wuhan—and those of working people throughout China—pose the question of united working class opposition to the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Beijing.

Posts related to the Wuhan protests became a “hot topic” viewed by 231 million users on Weibo, a Chinese social media platform equivalent to Twitter, in the space of three days, despite government censorship. Yet, Beijing is objectively incapable of addressing the social crisis in China, and discontent will only continue to grow.

The fight for democratic rights, including the right to live in a clean and safe environment, can be fought only through the unity of the entire Chinese working class to overturn the regime as part of the international struggle against capitalism.

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