

Chinese authorities commit workers' leader to psychiatric hospital to halt protests

Terry Cook
30 December 2000

In a transparent attempt to stamp out a protracted protest by workers at the Fuming County Silk Factory in China's eastern Jiangsu province, management and public security officials arrested one of the leaders, Cao Maobing, on December 15 and committed him to a psychiatric hospital.

Officials claimed that Cao, a 47-year-old electrician, had been diagnosed in 1998 with a psychiatric disorder but they have not produced any evidence of mental illness. Significantly, Cao's detention came only a day after he spoke to the international media about the dispute over unpaid entitlements and the right to form a trade union.

Cao accused management and local government officials of corruption, claiming they had contributed to the factory's financial difficulties. He said that in the mid-1990s management had asked employees to each invest \$US250 in the company to prop it up. Even though 3,000 workers invested, stock was never issued and the factory, which is owned by the county authority, is still in financial straits.

Following Cao's arrest, his co-workers released a statement denouncing the detention as "political persecution". "Chinese workers have not shared in the fruits of economic development and some have found it hard to survive. The official trade union of China has not spoken for workers," it said.

Attempts by Cao's wife and relatives to obtain his release have so far failed. Authorities at the mental institution in Yancheng City, where he is being held, now claim to have complied with the family's demand to stop trying to forcibly administer drugs to Cao.

Over the last year, more than half of the factory's workforce has been put on indefinite leave. The laid-off workers were supposed to receive about \$US20 a month in subsistence subsidy but the payments stopped

in June. Management has refused to pay proper pensions, saying there is no money. Some employees are also owed up to six months in back wages.

The local branch of the government-controlled trade union, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, fobbed off requests for help with promises that "something would be worked out". So Cao and his co-workers went on strike on November 11 demanding the payment of all monies. Delegations were sent to the provincial capital Nanjing and to Beijing to confront government authorities.

A petition was also sent to the union federation demanding it accept the formation of an alternative union at the plant. On November 31, after the federation leadership refused the request, the silk workers picketed the local headquarters chanting, "We demand the right to elect our own leaders".

Following the protests, the management paid several months of entitlements but nothing else. The authorities were particularly hostile to the demand for an independent union which has never been tolerated by Beijing. Previous attempts to set up rival organisations to the All-China Federation of Trade Unions have been ruthlessly suppressed.

The Chinese authorities were clearly concerned that the protests at Fuming Silk would spread to other factories in the province. On November 30, more than 1,000 employees laid off from a fertiliser plant surrounded the county government building, forcing authorities to pay unpaid living allowances and pensions. Workers from a brewery and a paper mill in Nanjing have threatened to organise similar protests.

The bureaucracy moved swiftly to silence Cao even though he had assured the government that he was not challenging the position of the Communist Party or the government. In his December 14 radio interview with

the *Voice of America*, Cao said he was worried that “if the workers' real problems are not dealt with, the situation will explode”.

Beijing's “economic reform” program has already led to the closure or privatisation of thousands of state-owned enterprises, large and small, the loss of millions of jobs and the widespread non-payment of wages, pensions and other entitlements.

Protests by workers are taking an increasingly militant and defiant form, including the blockading of key rail lines and the occupation of plants to prevent their closure. Demonstrations and strikes have gone ahead in spite of government warnings and police repression. Even the understated figures released by the Ministry of Labor show that the number of labour disputes in China has increased 14-fold over the eight years from 1992, with more than 120,000 conflicts recorded this year.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact