

Child labour in schools widespread

Fifty Chinese children killed in school fireworks explosion

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The villagers of Fanglin, an impoverished mountain hamlet in China's eastern province of Jiangxi, have paid a terrible price for the capitalist agenda being imposed by the Beijing regime. At 11:10am on March 6, as their young children assembled fireworks for a business operated by the son of a local government official, a large explosion ripped through the village's elementary school.

The blast blew out four rooms in the centre of the two-storey building and shattered glass hundreds of metres away. Devastated villagers say that 50 of Fanglin's 200 school children were killed, along with four adults. At least another 27 children were left with severe burns and other injuries. They described a horrific scene of crushed and dismembered children buried in the rubble, with parents desperately searching for their sons and daughters amidst the chaos.

The explosion was triggered in a classroom where students, aged 9-11, were inserting fuses into fireworks that had been filled with gunpowder by older students. While the exact cause is unknown, a government spokesman interviewed during the rescue effort told *Reuters* that the cause was "most probably... because of firecrackers, but a final result will come out after investigators convene." Parents alleged that the size of the explosion was because bags of gunpowder were stored in the classrooms.

A 13-year-old girl, Gao Yun, told *Reuters*: "We started making fireworks in the school four years ago, once or twice a week. Pupils in higher grades made the barrels and those in low grades attach the fuses. If we produce more, our teachers give us rewards like pencils or notebooks. But if we don't meet our targets we are not allowed to go home."

Fanglin and the nearby town of Tanbu are in Wanzhai county, which is a centre of the fireworks industry, employing up to one-fifth of the county's population. The official *China Daily* newspaper said numerous fireworks factories operated near the school, one just 1,500 metres away.

Local villagers told foreign media that a business arrangement existed between the school principal and one of the teachers, whose father is the Fanglin communist party secretary. In exchange for allowing the school's children to be exploited as free labour to assemble fireworks, the school received a percentage of the profits.

For at least three years, parents had raised objections and concerns, but the web of personal and profit relations between the

illegal school factory and the local authorities ensured that nothing was done.

Ding Mingzing, who lost his nine-year-old son in the explosion, told *Agence France Presse* that he suspected the pupils were rushing to fill orders for the Qingming Festival, or Grave Sweeping Festival on April 5. The school would force children to pay a fine for every assignment they missed. "The school said it was mandatory. They called it 'supporting oneself through school by working.'"

"In one street I saw four families holding funerals outside their homes at the same time. The parents were crying and screaming, 'The children died unjustly'. They were crying out to the sky and to the earth. The school is supposed to be the safest place," Ding said.

Zhang Minggeng, whose 11-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son were killed in the blast, said: "There is no law. My son told me his teacher forced him to kneel on the floor to punish him when he refused to make firecrackers. I went to complain to the township government. They said they would look into it, but they did not put a stop to it.

"I want justice, I want punishment. I want those responsible to be brought out to face us villagers."

The fate of the Fanglin children has sparked an outpouring of anger extending far beyond Wanzhai county, in part due to widespread use of students as child labour, but also due to the response of state officials who have tolerated or organised it.

According to Ding Mingzing, a local township official responded to the news of the children's death by telling Fanglin villagers: "It's not so bad, it's like a kind of family planning." Ding related: "He had to run for his life. People were very angry. Can you imagine an official, a member of the Communist Party, saying that to the masses?"

The main focus of anger, however, has been against the national government in Beijing, and Premier Zhu Rongji in particular. Within hours of the tragedy, newspapers, television stations and websites across China, Hong Kong and internationally were reporting the accusations of the parents that the school was being used as a factory.

Confronted by journalists at the National Peoples Congress, Rongji flatly denied the school had been involved in the manufacture of fireworks and claimed that the explosion was the

act of a “madman”.

He told a press conference: “It certainly is not the case that this primary school was trying to earn some money by trying to rent out space to store materials for fireworks. A man had grievances and he had a mental illness. He transported these fireworks and materials to the ground floor. He lit them and blew himself up.”

The media and state apparatus in China are now seeking to ensure that this blatant cover-up becomes not only the official, but the only version of what took place in Fanglin's school. Police have effectively sealed Fanglin off. There are roadblocks around the village and foreign journalists were ordered to return to the provincial capital of Nanchang. Internet chat-rooms have been cleared of any messages challenging the official account and telephone communications with the village have been cut.

According to accounts in the *Peoples Daily*, a man named Li Chuicai, who was nicknamed “psycho” by local villagers, had become mentally unbalanced since his wife left him 12 months ago. The murder/suicide in the school was the result. Police claim to have found a notebook in Li's house, declaring: “I will sacrifice myself, blast all, burn all”.

But before the media clampdown on Fanglin, villagers told their own story. Li Chuicai, the man being scapegoated for the tragedy, was a slightly mentally retarded man, hence the nickname, who was employed as a labourer for the school fireworks factory. One of his jobs was to carry the bags of gunpowder into the building. His wife had left him, but he had never been violent and exhibited no signs of depression.

Zhang Minggeng bitterly said of Beijing's story: “It's not true. They are all lying and trying to trick the central authorities. In China officials help officials. No one is helping us.” Zhang Cungen, whose son was killed, told the *South China Morning Post*: “The person who says that man is mentally ill [Li Chuicai] is the one who is mentally ill”.

One parent said: “They're pushing all the responsibility on him. He is dead now and we can't ask him anything. And they won't even let the reporters, including our own from Hunan and Guangdong, come.” Another added: “The kids died unjustly. They're letting all the bad people off the hook.”

According to one of the last reports from of the village, some 2,000 villagers from Fanglin and surrounding villages staged a demonstration on March 9, against the claims of Beijing and to demand that the local officials be brought to justice.

The tragedy in Fanglin and the government's whitewash underscore the fact that the Beijing bureaucracy has nothing to do with socialism. Over the last two decades, the regime has been rapidly removing any constraints on the capitalist market and the inflow of foreign investment—a process that has led to a deepening social divide and the reintroduction of the most brutal forms of exploitation.

Layers of the bureaucracy and their associated capitalist entrepreneurs have made huge fortunes and can afford the best of education for their children. But public education for the vast majority of children has been badly eroded and the lack of funding has forced many schools to hire out their students as cheap labour.

The Chinese government once claimed to provide nine years of free education to all children. Since the early 1990s, however,

Beijing has ended that guarantee and made provincial governments responsible for funding schools in the rural regions where the bulk of the population still live. The national government's education budget is overwhelmingly used for the wealthier urban areas and especially for higher education. Over one-third of national education funding is allocated to colleges and universities, which are attended by just 0.5 percent of the population.

China will spend just 2.4 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on education this year or 21.9 billion yuan (\$2.6 billion)—one of the lowest levels in Asia. By comparison, the average spending on education in so-called developing countries is 4.1 percent of GDP, and 5.3 percent in developed countries.

Provincial and local governments have put the burden of education onto parents in the form of school fees and levies. While schools that cater for the children of the political and new business elite have been able to raise funds through political connections and fees, schools in working class neighbourhoods and rural areas have found it more difficult.

The average fee in a rural school is 300 yuan, a huge burden when the average rural income is just 2,000 yuan. Even the official media admit that as many as five million children between the ages of 7 and 11, most of them girls, do not go to school because their parents cannot afford it. Many rural schools employ untrained teachers as their wages are lower. There are numerous reports in regional Chinese papers of rundown school buildings, shortages of paper and other stationery, and other symptoms of a general crisis in the education system.

The Chinese government has directed schools short of funds to raise finances by establishing commercial enterprises—a practice that has become very widespread. In 1996 the official New China News Agency published a story praising what it called “school businesses.” The report boasted that enterprises run by primary and secondary schools had generated \$US37 billion from 1991 to 1995, with an annual growth rate of 33.2 percent. It stated that 710,000 primary and secondary schools, or 93 percent of all schools in China had some sort of commercial enterprise.

The huge profits, of course, are generated by the cheap labour of children, often carrying out dirty and sometimes dangerous tasks. Chinese schools breed pigs, maintain farms, operate market stalls, sew, clean, or, in at least one area, assemble fireworks. The bulk of the profits do not flow to the students, parents or even the schools but to the various local officials and entrepreneurs involved. The Fanglin tragedy provides a glimpse of the awful consequences for the children and their families.



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