

Workers' protests continue in northeast China

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Despite the efforts of the central Beijing and local governments to end the working class unrest in China's north eastern provinces, laid-off workers in Liaoyang, Liaoning province, and the Daqing oilfields in Heilongjiang province have organised protest actions throughout May.

Hundreds of workers from the bankrupt Liaoyang Ferro-alloy Factory have been gathering before the city government building since May 3, to demand the release of their four arrested leaders—Yao Fuxin, Xiao Yunliang, Pang Qingxiang and Wang Zhaoming—and a resolution of their grievances. The four were detained during demonstrations of tens of thousands of workers in Liaoyang during March, protesting against unemployment, unpaid wages and official corruption.

Simmering tensions erupted when the mayor of Liaoyang told journalists the city did not have any unemployment problems. Over 500,000 state sector workers were laid off in Liaoning province last year and the vast majority are still owed a 10,000 yuan (\$US1,200) redundancy payout from their former employer. Most of the 6.8 million state sector workers in the province have only been paid sporadically over the past two years and many of those laid off are owed thousands of yuan in wages from companies that have been bankrupted by the government.

The depth of the anger can be gauged by the fact that Ferro-alloy workers have not abandoned their political demand for the release of their representatives despite the payment of their outstanding redundancy benefit in late March.

The Hong Kong-based China Labour Bulletin (CLB) reported that on May 7 the Liaoyang local government had attempted to end the silent rallies by asking the workers to appoint new representatives to meet with the city mayor. The workers refused to do so, fearing that

the government was trying to identify other militants for arrest. Instead, they issued an open letter to the mayor demanding the release of the four leaders. It also called for a public report on the forced bankruptcy of the city's state-owned factories, an investigation into official corruption and the punishment of police who had abused their positions. The letter warned that unless the demands were met, "collective demonstrations" would be organised in Beijing.

According to CLB sources, the city government rejected the demands. On May 15 it ordered a police attack on workers after they raised a banner denouncing the authorities. CLB reported: "More than 10 plainclothes police officers charged out of the government building's courtyard and attacked the workers with punches and kicks and seized their banners. Clashes followed as the workers protected the banners. During the clashes, the son of a retired Ferro-alloy worker, whose mother was beaten during the police assault, demanded to know why they had attacked his mother. As a result, he was severely beaten by the police and then taken away." Government officials later released the man in order to calm other workers.

The protests continued over the following days, with Reuters reporting on May 17 that a witness heard an official shouting to a crowd of assembled workers outside the government offices: "The four will be sentenced soon, your action is useless." Guo Xiujing, Yao Fuxin's wife, told Reuters over the phone that her house was under 24-hour surveillance and that police had told workers "not to come and talk to me". There have been no reports from the city in the past week.

Alongside the renewed tensions in Liaoyang, as many as 10,000 laid-off workers in the Daqing oil fields are reported to have been taking part in a series of new

protests since May 1. PetroChina, China's largest oil company and the owner of Daqing Petroleum, attempted to slash the redundancy provisions for some 80,000 laid-off employees in February in order to cut costs. The workers, mostly in their 40s and 50s, responded with weeks of mass demonstrations. As many as 60 workers were seized by police during the action and some are still being held in detention.

The unrest among laid-off oil workers in Daqing has spread to other oil fields. CLB reported on May 6 that some 60,000 redundant and retired workers from the major Shengli Oilfield in northern Hebei province, upon "hearing news of the sustained struggle of Daqing oilfield workers", are suing the Shengli Petroleum Administration Bureau for outstanding pensions and benefits. The workers have succeeded in having a local court file their case.

Chinese authorities are nervous about the potential for widespread protests as large-scale layoffs continue. The governor of Liaoning admitted on May 9 that "another 500,000 [state industry] workers would lose their jobs" this year in the province due to the free market restructuring of state-owned industries. The current urban unemployment rate in the north-east is believed to be over 25 percent in cities like Liaoyang and Shenyang.



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