Social discontent escalates in China

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According to figures cited by the January issue of the Hong Kong-based journal *Cheng Ming*, an explosive growth is taking place in the scale and intensity of opposition to the free market social policies of the Chinese Stalinist regime. The number of demonstrations and protests being reported to the journal by its mainland sources in the Chinese Ministry of Public Security has soared from an average of 80 per day in 2001, to more than 700 per day in December 2002.

Such is the level of concern in Beijing that Hu Jintao, the newly installed leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), convened an emergency 12-hour session of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee on December 12 to take reports from the party's Central Office, State Council Office and Ministry of Public Security. Hu Jintao was reportedly determined "to prevent the worsening of the situation and the eruption of crisis".

The meeting was the fifth emergency session since November 25, when Beijing warned all levels of government that they had to make "social stability" the priority of their work. Given the mass scale of the protests, the central government has instructed local authorities to avoid using large-scale police repression as it may provoke broader sections of the population to take to the streets.

It is significant that there is still no news of the fate of two workers' leaders—Yao Fuxin, 52, and Xiao Yunliang, 56—who were arrested last March after large demonstrations of laid-off workers in the northern city of Liaoyang. The two were put on trial last month on trumped-up charges of subversion. Despite the efforts of police and local authorities to intimidate their supporters, protests took place outside the court. There are clearly concerns that a guilty verdict could become a focus for the growing protest movement.

The Ministry of Public Security reported that protests, demonstrations and gatherings by urban workers reached 350 per day by the end of November and 500 per day in early December. In order to prioritise their response, the Chinese police now use a four-rank system to classify protest actions: less than 100 people is "small"; 100 to 500 people is "medium"; 500 to 2,000 participants is "large-scale"; and over 2,000 demonstrators is ranked as "special large-scale". In urban areas, at least 30 "large-scale" demonstrations are taking place every day, as well as 240 "medium-scale" protests.

In the rural areas, peasants across 15 provinces have reportedly engaged in recent protests against low living standards, high taxation and official corruption. Since mid-November, more than 250 rural protests have taken place involving over 1,000 people, including seven estimated at over 10,000 people. According to *Cheng Ming*, many of the protests assumed militant forms, with peasants storming local government buildings and clashing with police.

The major workers' protests widely reported during December include:

* December 2-7, Yaonan, Zilin province: 2,000 miners from the Yaonan coalmine zone protested on December 2 against non-payment of wages and the abysmal safety standards. Five days later, a mine explosion killed 32 workers. Over 10,000 miners held a demonstration, carrying a banner denouncing the government and calling for the arrest and public trial of the mine bureau directors.

* December 9, Qigihar city, Heilongjiang province: 6,000 workers laid-off from state-owned enterprises in the city protested, demanding that local authorities increase their social security payments.

* December 10, Datong city, Shanxi province: 10,000 workers laid-off by state-owned mining, construction and chemical plants surrounded government buildings over the failure of the local authorities to pay pensions and provide medical coverage. Workers accused officials of plundering the budget for their personal gain. The imported luxury car of the provincial vice-governor—which cost 50 times a workers' annual income—was set ablaze in protest.

* December 10, Huangshi Copper mine, Hubei province: 7,000 miners, who have not received regular pay for close to two years from the struggling state-owned

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mine, demonstrated over information that the mine bureau director had stolen at least $US4 million in cash from the company.

* December 11-14, Xyuizhou city, Jiangsu province: 7,000 primary and high school teachers protested against cuts to the city's education budget and plans to lay off teachers.

* December 14-15, Zhangjaikou, Hebei province: 5,000 laid-off workers stormed the city government after authorities reneged on a promise to improve re-training schemes and financial assistance.

* December 14-16, Pingxiang mine, Shanxi province: 5,000 miners sacked by the state-owned mine stormed the main city government building. Upon being laid-off, the workers were paid just six months salary, with no guarantee of long-term social security. The miners carried a banner reading: "Who rules the country? Corrupt officials and the privileged classes".

Major protests in rural areas in the same period included:

December 7-14, Yulin, Shaanxi province: An estimated 80,000 peasants rallied together for an "anti-taxation and anti-exploitation" conference. The weeklong assembly drafted a petition threatening a "revolt" if the central Beijing government does not provide redress.

December 8-16, Chongming county, Shanghai: 1,000 small peasants initiated a protest against local authorities selling farming land to developers for low prices. By December 15, their numbers had swollen to more than 5,000. The demonstration demanded that Huang Ju, the former head of the Shanghai Communist Party who was elected last year to the new leadership in Beijing, visit the region and answer the peasants' demands. On December 16, an attempt by 1,000 peasants to march into urban Shanghai was blocked by police.

December 12, Yunnan province: Some 10,000 tobacco growers protested against a decision by the provincial government and tobacco bureau in Kunming to lower the official purchase price for tobacco. A committee was established to organise ongoing campaigns against the government's policy.

December 14: Guangxi province: 3,000 sugarcane growers and labourers demonstrated against the lowering of sugar prices, demanding that the authorities restore them to their previous level.

The demonstrations reflect the desperation among China's working class and rural poor. The opening up of the country to massive foreign investment and its transformation into the cheap labour manufacturing centre of world capitalism has produced upheaval for hundreds of millions of people. While a thin layer has enriched itself by functioning as the middle-men for the major transnational companies, employment in the former industrial and mining provinces in China's north and north-east is being decimated by the scaling back of state-owned industry, while large numbers of peasants are being driven off the land and into the coastal export economic zones to look for work.

The recently-published official *Social Blue Book 2002* records that 48.07 million workers were laid-off from 1995 to 2000, "the equivalent of the total population of [South] Korea". Surveys among the urban population led the *Blue Book* to estimate that 100 to 200 million urban Chinese are "dissatisfied" with their social conditions, with 32 to 36 million being "extremely dissatisfied". The paper warned that "unemployment, official corruption and the inequality in wealth distribution" were the main reasons for the alienation.

Alongside the unrest in the old industrial and rural areas, the weeks leading up to the Chinese New Year witnessed an outpouring of pent-up discontent in China's major manufacturing cities on the coast, such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Thousands of workers who wished to return to their home towns and villages for the holiday engaged in angry protests against employers who had failed to pay wages in time. According to reports, over 72 percent of workers regularly experience delays in the payment of their wages.

The Chinese government, as it pursues its capitalist policies, is acutely conscious that it is sitting on top of a social time bomb. According to *Cheng Ming*, Hu Jintao reportedly warned the new Politburo that the state of society was "forcing people to rise up, to rebel and to seek to overthrow the leadership of the Communist Party".

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