

# Two Chinese workers sentenced to harsh prison terms

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Four months after their trial on charges of “subversion of state power,” two Chinese workers’ leaders—Yao Fuxin and Xiao Yunliang—have been sentenced to seven and four years in jail, respectively, by a court in the city of Liaoyang.

Yao and Xiao were arrested after helping to organise demonstrations of laid-off workers in Liaoyang in northeast China in March 2002. As many as 30,000 workers took part in peaceful rallies to demand financial aid and the prosecution of corrupt officials.

The harsh sentences handed down on May 9 were clearly aimed at deterring other workers from staging protests over China’s rising job losses and deteriorating living conditions.

At the initial trial in January, hundreds of workers defied police intimidation and held a demonstration in support of the two leaders outside the local public court. Last Friday’s proceedings were held under even tighter security. The hearing took place not in a courtroom, but at the police detention centre where the two workers have been held for more than a year.

According to Hong Kong-based *China Labour Bulletin*, only the two daughters of Yao and Xiao were allowed to enter the detention centre. Outside several hundred anti-riot security officers were mobilised to guard the building, as at least 300 local workers turned up to demonstrate their solidarity with the two leaders.

Their defence lawyer, Mo Shaoping, was unable to attend the hearing. Just four days before the hearing, he was suddenly served with a notice to undergo a compulsory quarantine of 10 days as a suspected carrier of serious acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).

The state press agency Xinhua claimed that two workers had been guilty of attempting to establish a local branch of the banned China Democracy Party in the city of Liaoyang. Yao and Xiao were also accused

of having “spread rumours and instigated local people to break into the Liaoyang City government departments, seriously disturbing their normal work order.”

The allegations are absurd. The China Democracy Party was all but destroyed when authorities illegalised the organisation and rounded up its leading members in 1998. Despite this, last year’s demonstrations by unemployed workers in Liaoyang were declared to be part of a political conspiracy by the China Democracy Party to overthrow the government.

Yao’s daughter, Yao Dan, told the *New York Times* that the legal proceedings took less than an hour and that the prosecutor’s charges were simply accepted by the court. “The verdicts are totally wrong and unfair. Both men set out not to harm society or the state but to speak for workers and secure their entitlements. We’re not the ones who should be on trial, it should be those corrupt officials,” she said.

Xiao’s wife condemned the charges as “trumped up” and declared: “We can’t accept the verdict.”

Both of the convicted workers are middle-aged and suffer serious health problems. Yao has been hospitalised twice for a stroke. Xiao has cataracts and his eyesight is so poor that he was unable to recognise family members. Their health has already deteriorated after a year in jail and will worsen further if they are compelled to serve their full terms.

Police intimidation continued even after the proceedings. The *China Labour Bulletin* reported: “Immediately after the hearing Yao Dan and Xiao Yun (the two daughters) were both driven away in separate police cars. Xiao Yunliang’s wife, Su Anhua, tried to stop the car taking her daughter away but was beaten to the ground by police. She lost consciousness and was taken to hospital. She was later taken home by her elder

daughter after the hospital asked for money for the medical treatment.” The two daughters were later released.

The Liaoyang Intermediate People’s Court and police were undoubtedly acting on instruction from the top Chinese leadership. Last year’s demonstrations of tens of thousands of unemployed workers were among the country’s largest and clearly shocked the Stalinist bureaucracy, which is acutely sensitive to any sign of unrest.

Beijing’s pro-capitalist policies have resulted in the retrenchment of millions of workers as state-owned enterprises have been restructured and either sold off or shut down altogether. Sacked workers also have also lost their access to any the social benefits that were in the past provided by state-owned companies. The resulting destitution has sparked widespread, though often small and isolated, protests.

The fear in Beijing is that such unrest could coalesce into a broad anti-government movement. A state-run magazine *Public Security Research* warned last year: “As the market economy has developed, mass incidents are constantly occurring and they are characterised by high levels of organisation, dramatic impact and major disturbances of society.”

The outbreak of SARS has heightened the nervousness in the Chinese leadership. The epidemic is already threatening foreign investment and exports. Any expressions of social instability could lead to a further downturn in investment and compound the political, economic and social problems facing Beijing.

The State Planning Development Commission recently revised its estimate for this year’s jobless rate from 4 percent up to 4.5 percent as a result of SARS. The actual figure is almost certainly higher. The Ministry of Labour and Social Security, which defines unemployment as anyone who “cannot earn more than the basic living allowance provided by local government”, estimates joblessness at between 8 to 10 percent—excluding 120 million rural workers who are categorised as “surplus labour”.

Chinese authorities have already exploited the SARS epidemic to bolster the police presence on the streets and to introduced tough new restrictions on basic democratic rights. Four people have been jailed for using the Internet to “spread harmful rumours causing social panic, undermining the fight against the spread

of disease and destroying social order.” Another 107 people have been arrested for doing the same by mobile phone. These draconian measures are designed to forestall unrest and to send a message to foreign investors that Beijing has the situation under control.

The treatment meted out to Yao Fuxin and Xiao Yunliang serves a similar purpose. They were jailed not because they were involved in any “subversion of the state”, but to demonstrate to international financial circles that the Chinese bureaucracy will not tolerate any opposition from below that threatens to disrupt the operation of the capitalist market and foreign investment.



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