

China: riot in Guangdong province points to broad social unrest

John Chan

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A riot involving some 30,000 people in Jieyang city in southern Guangdong province on November 10 has highlighted the mounting hostility of broad layers of the Chinese population to the economic impositions and autocratic rule of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

According to Radio Free Asia, the incident was triggered by an argument between a village woman and employees at a toll station on the only bridge connecting Xianqiao Township and Rongcheng District. After the woman complained that she was being charged two yuan for her motorbike, the toll station employees beat her up.

The incident rapidly provoked an angry protest. Local governments throughout China have increasingly been using tolls on roads and bridges as a means of supplementing their income. For farmers who are already subject to a range of onerous taxes and levies, these tolls are a source of constant friction.

Following the beating, thousands of local farmers stormed the toll station; looting the property and setting it alight with petrol. Four fire engines came to the rescue but were prevented from reaching the building by the tens of thousands of protestors. An old man was accidentally killed and two children injured by a fire engine when reversing, provoking further outrage. Two of the fire engines were set on fire and seven fire fighters injured.

Hundreds of police and paramilitary units headed by a local party boss dispersed the crowd around midnight. Dozens of people were arrested and many more were injured in the confrontation. The following day, the local police bureau warned they would severely punish ringleaders of the riot.

The riot is just one of a series of violent, large-scale clashes that have erupted in China in recent months. These have included a protest by tens of thousands of

people who stormed government buildings in Wenzhou and a revolt by 100,000 farmers against their forced eviction to make way for a hydroelectric dam in Sichuan province. Both demonstrations were ended by the ruthless use of security forces. In the latter protest, 17 people were reportedly killed, 40 injured and more than 100 arrested.

What lies behind the growing protests is the impact of the vast economic restructuring and the huge influx of foreign capital that has taken place over the past two decades. Social inequality has grown enormously as millions of workers in state-owned enterprises have been thrown out of work; farmers compelled to compete on the capitalist market and pay rising levels of tax; and tens of millions of rural immigrants forced to labour in harsh conditions in sweatshops in coastal China.

The rising price of oil and other raw materials and the increased cost of energy and transportation have forced both Chinese and foreign firms to further cut working conditions and wages in order to maintain their profit margins. Inflation, largely due to the huge increase of imports and inflow of speculative credit, has greatly increased the cost of living for millions of people.

Such conditions are causing rising social tensions. According to recent official figures, the number of protests rose by 15 percent last year to more than 58,000 separate incidents, involving more than 3 million people. The latest riot in Guangdong province—China's most dynamic export region—indicates the social unrest is no longer confined to backward inland provinces but is occurring in relatively prosperous coastal areas as well.

A series of strikes have been reported among workers in the Guangdong province. In early November, nearly a thousand employees from a Dongguan-based home

appliance manufacturer blocked the factory gate, demanding at least one day off a week and increased pay.

On November 12, workers from a Shenzhen-based factory producing audio speaker parts took two of their Hong Kong bosses hostage, out of fear that the bankrupt company would not pay them 200,000 yuan of owed wages. On November 22, hundreds of workers clashed with security guards and police during a protest against layoffs at an electronic company in Shenzhen.

The recent trial of workers jailed over a protest at Stella, a major Taiwanese shoe manufacturer, earlier in the year gives an indication of the sentiments of broad layers of working people. As reported in the *Washington Post*, their defence lawyer Chen Nanliu told the court that their protests over unpaid wages and poor working conditions were legitimate because there was a “clear and pressing social cause, namely the fact our society today permits and encourages the most naked form of social injustice.”

In his final statement, Chen compared the conditions facing shoe workers to those of exploited Chinese labourers prior to the 1949 revolution under the Kuomintang regime. Unlike in the past, he declared, “today the Communist Party is fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with the coldblooded capitalists in their struggle against the workers.” That such criticisms should be openly presented in court is a measure of the depth of opposition among workers to the Stalinist regime.

The rising level of protests in China is causing growing concerns both in Beijing and also internationally. Having tens of billions of dollars invested in cheap labour sweatshops in China, foreign capital is nervous about the explosive consequences of the country’s vast social changes. Within the Stalinist bureaucracy itself, there has been an ongoing and increasingly bitter debate over where the Communist Party should seek new social bases of support.

Neither Beijing nor its foreign backers have any answers to the deepening social problems facing tens of millions of people—other than violent police repression.



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