

May Day awards in China honour the wealthy elite

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This year's May Day list of Chinese "model workers" highlighted again the thoroughly pro-capitalist and nationalist character of the Stalinist regime in Beijing. Prominent among some 3,000 individuals feted for supposedly contributing "selflessly to the enterprise of socialist construction" were 30 leading businessmen and the US National Basketball Association (NBA) star Yao Ming.

Since the Chinese Communist Party embraced the free market and opened the country to foreign capital in 1978, the May Day holiday has lost its traditional symbolism for the regime. Whereas once it was hailed as a celebration of the working class and used as an occasion for pseudo-socialist rhetoric about building a new society, the week-long holiday has been promoted since the mid-1990s as a "golden holiday" for the newly-affluent urban middle classes to shop and stimulate China's consumer spending.

Particular attention was given by the state-controlled media to Yao Ming, a national team player who was recruited by the Houston Rockets. The Chinese government declared that he was qualified to be a model worker because his well-known statement, "I am always on duty for the motherland", was an example of "patriotic spirit".

The *Los Angeles Times* commented on April 28: "To many of his fans, the 'Little Giant', as Yao is affectionately known here, is a patriotic poster child. As a condition for joining the NBA, he was required to give half his NBA salary to Chinese sports authorities. It is unclear how much they will take from the \$70 million in endorsement fees he is expected to receive over the next 10 years from such corporations as McDonald's, Apple Computer, Visa International, watchmaker Tag Heuer and Garmin, a maker of global-positioning products."

Alongside promoting nationalism, naming Yao as a model worker was also an effort by the regime to appeal to middle class youth and stoke their illusions that individuals can amass vast fortunes due to China's integration into the world capitalist market.

As for the naming of private entrepreneurs, the *LA Times* noted: "To give the awards more legitimacy this year, authorities made changes. Capitalists, once seen as oppressors of the people, can now receive the nation's top honour."

Liu Yonghao, a businessman listed by US *Forbes* magazine as China's richest man, for example, was among this year's model workers. Another entrepreneur rewarded with the title was the president of Fujian Hengan Group, whose tax payments last year amounted to 200 million yuan (\$US24 million).

To tens of millions of Chinese workers, who face long hours, low pay and terrible working conditions, the May Day holiday and the model worker awards meant little. In many cases, they did not even receive one day off, let alone a "golden" week.

Wei Yanzhou, a 42-year-old welder in Beijing who works 12 hours a day and is paid \$100 per month told the *LA Times*: "They will never pick one of us [as model worker]." A bricklayer, Zhu Zhou said: "We eat cabbage three times a day. Sometimes the rice has sand in it. We see meat maybe twice a week. We don't even get enough drinking water, never mind a shower." Another worker, Fu Xiewen, declared: "They should pick us as model workers. Everybody already knows who Yao Ming is. He's a star. We are nobodies."

The week-long holiday saw strikes and riots by workers over various injustices, which were answered with police repression.

According to Radio Free Asia, 2,000 coal miners from several state-owned mines in Gong County,

Sichuan province protested on the eve of May Day in front of the local government and clashed with riot police. The protest was sparked by speculation that they may lose their jobs in the restructuring and shutdown of the state-run enterprises. Several workers were injured by the police and hospitalised.

On May 5, in Guangzhou, the capital of southern Guangdong province, 700 workers from a Taiwanese-owned shoe factory protested over low wages and the reduction of their May Day holiday to just one day off. Workers blocked a main road for an hour until police came and broke up the demonstration. Workers complained that they work more than 180 hours of overtime per month, but are only paid 510 yuan (\$US63)—an hourly rate of just 1.8 yuan (\$0.20) per hour.

The same day, 12 coal miners were killed in a gas explosion in a mine in Touqian County in Inner Mongolia. Every year, tens of thousands of Chinese workers are killed or maimed in industrial accidents.

The volatility of class relations in China was underscored by Beijing's crackdown against the calls by organisers of the recent anti-Japanese protests for major rallies on the anniversary of the May 4 Movement of 1919.

Fearing that May 4 rallies could develop into working class demonstrations, the regime arrested dozens of people and shutdown many anti-Japanese web sites. In Shanghai, police arrested Tang Hua, the organiser of the main April 16 anti-Japanese protest. He has subsequently been sentenced to five years of jail.

Using the excuse that Tiananmen Square was needed for a ceremony honouring school students turning 18, Beijing police sealed off the area to prevent any mass gatherings. Universities in the capital warned students that anyone who participated in a protest would be expelled.

Last month's anti-Japanese protests were given tacit support by the regime and were dominated by a better-off social layer that has benefited from the capitalist market. The concern in Beijing, however, is that any movement, even an initially pro-government one, could become the vehicle for workers to raise their social and democratic demands.

Last month, 10,000 workers employed by the Japanese electronic firm Uniden in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, producing wireless phones for

Walt Mart, held their second strike this year to demand an independent union. The strike was ended with brutal police suppression. Amid the anti-Japanese protests, another 2,000 workers rioted over the working conditions in a Japanese-owned plant in the nearby manufacturing city, Dongguan. These actions implicitly raised the prospect of a broader movement, directed not only against the conditions in Japanese corporations, but against the similar conditions in other foreign-owned and Chinese-run companies.

An editorial comment of US-based *Business Week* noted on the eve of May 4 that Beijing would not allow any protest actions to reach the point where they “threatened the inflow of foreign investment” and political stability in China:

“Of course, Beijing doesn't mind anti-Japanese nationalist outbursts. They provide an escape valve, allowing citizens upset by government corruption, job losses or untempered greed to blow off some steam at something other than the Chinese government. But there are limits to how far Beijing will go in allowing its people even this modicum of self-expression. Protests cross the line if they begin to place China's economic interests in jeopardy....”

In other words, the wealth and privilege for a minority that was feted by the Stalinist regime this May Day rests upon the exploitation, poverty and continuous repression of the vast mass of Chinese workers and rural poor.



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