

Thousands of Chinese students riot over bleak job prospects

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5 July 2006

Facing an uncertain future, thousands of graduating Chinese college students expressed their frustration last month in protests and riots.

The biggest demonstration erupted on June 15. Some 10,000 students in central China's Zhengzhou city ransacked classrooms and administrative offices and clashed with hundreds of police in one of the most intense student protests since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.

The riot broke out at the private Shengda Economic, Trade and Management College, which is affiliated with the prestigious Zhengzhou University and has 13,000 students. After paying expensive tuition fees and undertaking years of study, students were angered by the college's decision to award graduates diplomas in its own name, rather than "Zhengzhou University", as promised in its advertisements. The title "Zhengzhou University Shengda Economic, Trade and Management College" will immediately reveal the second-class character of their qualifications to employers.

Amid intensive competition in China's labour market, even a degree from a well-known university no longer guarantees a job. According to recent government estimates, despite an annual economic growth of more than 9 percent, some 60 percent of China's four million college graduates this year are unlikely to obtain work (see: China's middle-class dream shattered: millions of graduates face unemployment).

Hong Kong's *Ming Pao* newspaper reported on June 19: "The maddened students first threw objects out of the windows of their quarters, and there was a rain of vacuum flasks, beer bottles, fire-fighting apparatus, TV sets, washing machines and glass." Later that night, thousands of students gathered in front of the administration buildings and chanted slogans

demanding their money back. Students smashed offices and library facilities, and burned the statues of school founders.

"The angry students then swarmed onto the streets, smashing things as they went.... The police made several sallies, but faced with attack by a hail of stones, could only retreat. After the Zhengzhou armed police were sent in, the students calmed down somewhat," *Ming Pao* noted. A hundred armed police officers and 14 police vehicles then sealed the campus. Security personnel took photos of students who participated in the riot and refused to let most students leave the college. An online school bulletin board was shut down after students used it to voice protests and emailed their comments to international media.

In response, students staged sit-in protests and a boycott of exams over the following days. One student, Xu, told AFP: "The stance of the school remains tough but if the institute does not resolve this issue, we will continue to boycott classes and examinations."

A Canadian teacher working at the college emailed Canada's *Globe and Mail* on June 20: "This morning the students have gathered and about half of them are refusing to take their exams today. They feel cheated and lied to, and they have lost everything, including their parents' money. The Chinese teachers have ordered the students to write their exams but they are refusing."

On June 22, the *New York Times* provided some background to the protest. Most of the students enrolled at Shengda did not perform well enough in national college entrance exams to get into prestige universities. They paid \$US2,500 a year to attend Shengda—compared to China's per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of just \$1,500. Shengda's fees are five times higher than those of the national-level

Zhengzhou University. Far from obtaining a higher quality of education, the exorbitant fees are a means of virtually buying a university degree.

In 1998, the Chinese government's "market reform" of the education system included the expansion of largely profit-making private college education. Hundreds of new colleges were set up to enroll millions of students who could not enter the big public universities but were able to pay expensive fees for higher education. Some of the colleges offered certificates bearing the names of higher status institutions as a major attraction and charged higher prices. A regulation passed in 2003, however, required colleges to issue diplomas with their own names.

In order to placate angry students, Hou Heng, the headmaster of the Shengda college, was forced to resign under pressure from his superiors at Zhengzhou University and probably also from the government. Nevertheless, the students are unlikely to receive what they had paid for—a certificate telling employers they were trained in Zhengzhou University.

Wang, a Shengda student from a rural community in Henan province, told the *Times* why the downgrading of the certificates was catastrophic for students. "There are not many positions open in the business world compared with the numbers of applicants, and they all go to the national-level university graduates," he said. Wang said most his schoolmates would struggle to pay off their debts while facing great difficulty in finding jobs.

Shengda students were not the first to protest. Last December, 3,000 students at the East Soft Information Institute of Dalian city, affiliated to Northeast University, rioted over the same issue.

As the protests continued in Zhengzhou, Associated Press reported on June 21 that some 9,000 students from the Jiangnan campus of Sichuan University in southwestern China rioted after the authorities banned them from watching the soccer World Cup. They set fires and smashed equipment after the school administration shut down the power supply at midnight to force students to prepare for exams.

On June 25, according to the BBC Chinese service, based on reports in a number of Hong Kong newspapers, thousands of students at Jiujiang College in Jiangsu province protested against arbitrary school fees. The students smashed some school facilities and

several cars belonging to school officials.

The Chinese government is acutely aware of the danger of student unrest, which historically has been the prelude of wider working class discontent. In June 1989, the demands of Beijing university students for democratic rights rapidly become a focus for disaffection among workers throughout the country, who raised their own social demands. The movement ended in a bloodbath after the regime ordered troops and tanks to crush the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. Seventeen years on, none of the underlying social conflicts have been resolved but instead have intensified as Beijing has stepped up its capitalist measures.

The emergence of protests among poor and desperate Chinese students is part of broader global processes. Earlier this year, millions of French students and workers waged a massive struggle against draconian legislation that allows employers to treat school graduates as expendable cheap labour.

The explosive events in France may seem unrelated to those in China. In reality, the social attacks on French youth cannot be understood in isolation from the plight of hundreds of millions of Chinese workers and youth who are being ruthlessly exploited by global capital in order to drive down wages and social conditions around the world.



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