

Police attack May Day protesters in Macau

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On May Day, thousands of workers took to streets in the Macau—a Chinese special administration zone—to protest against rising social inequality, the lack of affordable housing and official corruption. The demonstration followed a similar protest by 5,000 workers on May Day last year, pointing to rising social tensions.

Macau police estimated that about 2,000 people participated, but local union officials claimed the number was as high as 10,000, mainly poorly-paid construction workers and civil servants. Whatever the number, the protest is a significant and rare event in this former Portuguese colony of just half a million people.

Macau reverted to Chinese rule in 1999. In recent years, the Chinese leadership has praised the enclave as a model of political stability and prosperity. This is in contrast to the former British colony of Hong Kong, where large protests over the lack of democratic rights and falling living standards forced the Beijing-backed Tung Chee-hwa to step down as chief executive in 2005.

The protest on May 1 demonstrated that similar discontent exists in Macau. The march started peacefully. Local trade union officials promoted the parochial demand for the government to restrict “illegal migrants” from China, who are accused of stealing local jobs.

However, anger erupted when protestors stopped outside a mortuary preparing the funeral for the brother of Macau’s chief executive Edmund Ho. Workers began chanting the slogans “Edmund Ho step down” and “We have been forced by the government to revolt”. Clashes occurred when the marchers attempted to enter the main business district and government compounds at a crossroads.

Workers clashed with police who tried to push the crowd back. Protestors surrounded one police vehicle

and threw water bottles and placards at police officers. Police responded with batons, dogs and pepper spray, and put water cannons on alert.

One police officer fired warning shots into sky. A man riding a motorbike with his son 300 metres away from the demonstration was struck in the neck by a bullet. He had to be hospitalised, as the bullet lodged in one of his lungs. Several workers were arrested during the five-hour standoff. Television footage showed police beating workers with batons and dragging off those under arrest by their hair.

The police violence triggered widespread criticism, forcing Edmund Ho to later disclaim the gunshots as “neither a means to suppress the demonstration nor ... an order made by a senior police official.” Nevertheless, he blamed the protesters saying “a few had a political motive that led to the disturbance”.

Workers were clearly angry and frustrated about the growing social inequality in Macau, despite its so-called casino boom. A construction worker, Lee Kin-yan, told reporters: “The government is rich, the casinos are rich but nobody is looking out for the Macau people.” Leung Chi-Keung declared: “There is serious collusion between the government and big business.”

Since Ho’s deregulation of the gaming laws in 2001, Macau has seen a huge inflow of foreign capital, including from some of the world’s largest gambling companies such as MGM Mirage Inc and Steve Wynn. Las Vegas Sands Corp is building a series of casinos, hotels, convention centres and shopping malls.

Macau has overtaken Las Vegas as the world’s largest gaming centre. According to a report on the *Forbes.com* web site, in 2006 Macau’s per capita GDP of \$28,439 surpassed the Hong Kong figure of \$27,526 for the first time. But there is a deepening social divide.

“Macau’s wealth distribution is as uneven as the city’s appearance. Macau still resembles a quiet fishing

village more than a modern metropolis, with towering construction cranes and occasional shining new casinos sitting among narrow streets and old, decrepit housing estates,” the *Forbes* article explained.

The inflow of foreign capital has resulted in rising property prices, making housing and rents unaffordable for the majority of workers. According to government figures, even though per capita GDP is higher, the median monthly income of just 6,684 patacas (about \$US830) is lower than the corresponding Hong Kong figure of \$HK10,000 (\$US1,270).

The Hong Kong-based *Standard* newspaper of May 3 quoted Antonio Ng, a Democratic New Macau lawmaker, who admitted that “grassroots workers with monthly incomes of about 4,000 patacas (\$US500) could not afford monthly rents of 3,000 patacas or more, the current going rate.”

The casino and hotel construction boom has also led to labour shortages and an influx of workers from China and Hong Kong. The government has encouraged the inflow of cheap labour, but local workers have lost their jobs. Rather than calling for a unified campaign to defend jobs and conditions, union bureaucrats have pitted workers in Macau against those from elsewhere in China, and demanded the expulsion of immigrant labour.

The public anger over living standards is further fuelled by official profiteering in collusion with property developers. In April, Macau investigators alleged that the former secretary for transport and public works, Ao Man-long, who was arrested last year, had skimmed off up to 800 million patacas from public construction projects during 2002-2006. Large areas of Macau’s limited habitable land have been given over to projects associated with the gaming industry, rather than to urgently needed housing for working people.

Camoes Tam, a scholar from Macau Inter-University Institute, told the media: “There are simply no land reserves for the next 20 years, and future chief executives will not have suitable land on which to build public housing. They all went down with Ao.” He pointed out that the chief executive had taken no action to build the 8,000 public housing flats planned for the next five years. “How much longer can the people wait?” he asked.

Far from being an oasis of prosperity and stability, the deepening social inequality in Macau is fuelling

popular unrest and opposition, just as in the rest of China.



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