

# Slave labour scandal erupts in China

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A scandal involving the brutal exploitation of slave labour in China's brick industry has once again confirmed the absurdity of describing the country as "socialist" or "communist".

The Chinese media reported on May 27 that police had rescued 31 slave labourers from a brick kiln in Hongdong County in Shanxi province. Prior to their release, these workers were forced to work 18 hours a day without any pay under the watch of guards and attack dogs. They were given only bread and water to eat. All had suffered burns on their bodies from carrying hot bricks. Eight were so mentally confused that they could not even remember where they had come from. None had had access to a bath. The *Shanxi Evening News* reported that the grime on their bodies "was so thick it could be scraped off with a knife".

The son of a local Communist Party secretary owned the kiln. Both father and son were arrested. Most of their slaves were rural migrant workers kidnapped at the train stations in Zhengzhou and Xian—the provincial capitals of Henan and Shaanxi. One had been killed by guards for working too slowly.

The police raid was not initiated by government at any level, but was the result of a campaign by parents who lost their children to these brick kilns. Last month, they pressured a Zhengzhou television station to report on the existence of bonded labourers, finally compelling local authorities to act.

The scandal extended after 400 fathers from Henan province wrote an open online petition, in which they pleaded for help to rescue their enslaved children in various brickworks. They claimed a thousand children had been kidnapped and sold to private bosses for as little as 500 yuan or \$US65. The children were forced to work 14 hours a day and were as young as eight. Some had been crippled or died as a result of overwork and abuse.

Chai Wei, whose 17-year-old son went missing in April in Zhengzhou, told *Xinjingbao* newspaper he had searched several dozen brickworks. "The places those children lived in were worse than dog kennels. There were no beds—they slept on wooden planks, and the walls were covered in excrement. We are still scared by what we saw." He said

local police would not help the parents at all. "Many of the local police are close to the kiln owners and would warn them ahead if a search party was coming. We learned not to rely on them but to tour the kilns one by one ourselves."

Within a week, the petition had been viewed 310,000 times on the original web site. When it was reposted on the more popular Tianya site on June 7, it was viewed 580,000 times within just six days and attracted 3,000 comments. In the words of the official *China Daily*, the scandal "has shocked the nation and caused a public uproar".

President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao were compelled to order the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, with assistance of the Ministry of Public Security and the state-controlled trade union, to launch a showpiece campaign. By last Sunday night, 45,000 police officers had raided 8,000 brick kilns and small coal mines in the provinces of Shanxi and Henan. The operation freed 591 slaves, including 51 children. Critics pointed out, however, that this was just the tip of the iceberg.

The first 31 victims rescued received compensation of only 1,000 yuan (\$US130) each, plus payment for their labour based on a monthly wage of just 1,410 yuan (\$186). The Hongdong government is sending teams across the country to visit the victims' families and apologise.

So far, 168 factory operators or associates have been arrested. In Hongdong County, 20 officials have been removed or are under investigation. The police are hunting 20 more people. As in the case of coal mining disasters that kill thousands of workers every year, these low-ranking officials or small bosses are likely to be made scapegoats.

The ultimate responsibility lies with the entire Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership and its pro-market policy. Deepening poverty has forced tens of millions of rural labourers into the cities as super-exploited cheap labour. Most ended up in sweatshops that are not much better than outright slavery. This huge "floating population" in turn, creates the basis for the lucrative business of human trafficking—often with the collusion of local officials, private bosses and organised gangs.

Zhengzhou's busy railway station, through which 150,000 people pass every day, is notorious as a hub for slave traders.

Many people were kidnapped or lured from there with false promises of jobs, then sold as slaves to rural brick kilns or coal mines at distant locations. A 16-year-old victim, Zhu Guanghui, told reporters that a local labour inspector sold him for 300 yuan (\$40).

According to the *Chongqing Chengbao* newspaper, 95 percent of brick kilns in Hongdong County were operating illegally without government approval. Due to the rising demand for bricks to feed the country's construction boom, brick kilns have been set up across rural Shanxi. Yang Peng, who runs a "legal" brick factory, said the price of bricks had increased over 50 percent since he started his business several years ago. "Migrant workers are paid less than locals. In order to cut costs, kiln bosses hire more and more migrants. To keep workers to labour for a long period, many kilns hold wages in arrears. Workers were often beaten when ask for pay," he explained.

The use of slave labour is certainly shocking, but it is not a secret. Many brick kilns, coal mines and factories—illegal and legal—have been using slaves or bonded labour for years. China's minimal labour laws have no effect on the operation of the capitalist labour market. The country's frenzied growth requires huge quantities of low-cost bricks and coal. The Chinese bureaucracy, which is busy making money through its business dealings, simply turns a blind eye. Even the official Xinhua news agency had to observe last Sunday: "The reason why such flagrant crimes were committed in the brick kilns of Shanxi is that businessmen and local officials worked hand-in-glove."

The real concern of the CCP leadership is that it is increasingly difficult to keep ordinary working people in the dark as to the state of society. The opening up of China to the world and the explosive growth of communication technology, particularly the Internet, has created new information channels, which, despite Beijing's efforts, cannot be completely controlled. Crude state propaganda, coverups and intimidation cannot effectively prevent a growing self-consciousness among layers of workers and youth.

Chinese propaganda officials reportedly ordered web sites to edit and cut comments that were politically hostile. But it has been impossible to completely censor the deeply felt anger and disgust generated by the exploitation of slave labour and the more general hostility to capitalist relations and the huge social chasm between the country's rich and poor.

In feedback to the web site of the state-owned *People's Daily*, one person simply cited the well known quote from Karl Marx: "Capital comes into being dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt". Another wrote: "Shanxi is the microcosm of the whole country, as the rich

live in heaven while the poor are in the hell." A third commented: "Capital eats man, capitalism eats man." Another noted: "The evil is private property." Some of the bloggers called on the corrupt party bosses in Shanxi to be shot rather than simply sacked.

An article posted under the pen name Yundan Shiunuan angrily denounced the "new social elite," explaining that the rural kiln owners were just the bottom layer of an emerging capitalist class. The more powerful elite in the cities accumulated their wealth by plundering state enterprises or through stock market speculations, which was not so different from the kiln operators.

"Compared to the top's 'elegancy', 'culture' and even 'philanthropy', the bottom wanted to radically climb the ladder up, but is blocked by their resources, geographical location and limited energy. Therefore, their accumulation of wealth is more barbaric and brutal, and in contrast to the hypocrisy at the top, which is more naked," Yundan Shiunuan declared.

"Marx [actually it was Engels] once said: 'For the bourgeoisie nothing exists in this world, except for the sake of money, itself not excluded. It knows no bliss save that of rapid gain, no pain save that of losing gold. In the presence of this avarice and lust of gain, it is not possible for a single human sentiment or opinion to remain untainted.' In order to pursue profit interests, the entire elite know no other pain, or even if they knew, they proceed."

Article 1 of China's constitution still declares that the state is "led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants. The socialist system is the basic system of the People's Republic of China."

The claim was always a lie. But the unfettered operation of the market over the past 25 years and the transformation of China into a huge sweatshop for the world's corporations have produced all the barbarities of capitalism, including the most primitive forms of accumulation. To call this socialism and to describe China as a workers' state is a grotesque political travesty.



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