

China: School attacks point to rising social tensions

Oliver Campbell
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A series of violent attacks on young school students has taken place in China, with five episodes in March and April resulting in serious injury and in some cases multiple deaths. As with the phenomenon of school shootings in the US, the incidents in China are not simply the product of individuals, but a tragic expression of the growth of enormous social inequality and the resultant tensions.

The first attack took place on March 23 in Nanping, a city of Fujian Province in eastern China. A 41-year-old former medical worker, Zheng Minsheng, stabbed eight children to death and injured five others outside the gates of one of the city's most prestigious elementary schools. Zheng had resigned from his low-paid position as a community doctor in 2009, possibly over disputes with hospital management, and had remained unemployed.

According to a *China Daily* article, Zheng's family was one of the poorest in their town. He lived with five relatives, including his mother and his brother's family, in a 61-square metre apartment, requiring him to sleep in the living room or on the balcony.

Neighbours indicated that Zheng's poverty and unemployment were a source of bitterness and family tensions. Zheng's brother became hostile toward him because he was not bringing in an income, while Zheng blamed his problems on his mother. Zheng's anger was further fuelled by repeated relationship failures. He was unable to get married, because he could not afford an apartment.

Zheng was typical of a large section of professional employees in China who have lost their "middle-class" status, and are often mired in poverty not so different from that experienced by factory workers. The inability to afford a roof over one's head—a direct result of the Beijing regime's dismantling of the public housing

system while encouraging rampant property speculation—has generated enormous hardship among working people.

The immediate trigger for the attack was that Zheng had been turned down by a girl from a wealthy family. As he later confessed, Zheng's sense of hopelessness and despair crystallised into an inarticulate and confused desire to take revenge on the "rich" and "powerful officials". He targeted the innocent children with a knife at a wealthy school.

Zheng was executed on April 28, following a hasty four-hour trial. This draconian response, which makes a mockery of justice, points to the regime's crude methods in dealing with complex social problems. Initially, the police pointed to Zheng's mental instability. But prosecutors dismissed any mitigating factors, saying he had no known history of mental illness, and charged him with intentional homicide.

The reference to an absence of recorded mental illness was disingenuous. Chronic underfunding of the public health system has transformed health care into a major burden for most working people, preventing many from seeing a doctor, even in life-threatening cases. According to a survey published in the *Lancet* medical journal, of the 173 million adults believed to suffer from mental illness, 91 percent have never received any professional medical assistance.

The March 23 attack was followed by another on April 12. In Guangxi province, Yang Jiaqin, a 40-year-old man, attacked students and bystanders with a meat cleaver, killing a second-grade student and an elderly woman. Whilst information is scanty, it has been reported that the attacker was known to suffer from a mood disorder and his family recognised that he required psychiatric help.

On April 28, in Leizhou in Guangdong Province, a

33-year-old man injured 15 students and a teacher with a knife. He had worked as a teacher at another school, but went on sick leave in 2006 on the grounds of mental illness.

The next day, Xu Yuyuan, a 47-year-old unemployed man, went on a rampage at a school in Taixing in Jiangsu Province, injuring 29 students, most around the age of 5 or 6, one security guard and two teachers with an eight-inch knife. The *Caijing* magazine reported that four children were killed, but the death toll has not been officially confirmed. While there are conflicting reports, it appears that Xu was fired from his job as an insurance salesman in 2001, and subsequently took part in failed pyramid schemes and entrepreneurial activities.

On April 30, Wang Yonglai, a farmer, went to a nursery in Shandong province in eastern China and injured five pupils thought to be aged around 6 with a hammer, before self-immolating. Wang was enraged by the local government's plans to demolish his son's house, on which he Wang had spent his savings. The house was built on farmland, which is illegal in China, but according to family members Wang had received official permission.

According to his sister-in-law, Wang was under severe pressure from officials to sign a document allowing the demolition. "They forced him into it. There was nothing he could do. It made him mad," she said. The forced demolition of homes, mainly to make way for large developers and industrial projects, often in collusion with corrupt officials, is a constant source of social tension, often leading to mass protests.

Like their counterparts in the West, the stock standard response of the state media and officials to such incidents is to blame the individual and call for tougher law-and-order measures. The attack at Leizhou was given prominent front-page coverage by mainstream media outlets. Overall, the government's comments have mirrored the habitual media response in the US to school shootings. The attackers have been characterised as "bad" and "anti-social", and even as "individual terrorists".

However, Pi Yijun, a criminology professor at China University of Political Science and Law in Beijing, admitted that the violent incidents are related to rising joblessness and the widening gap between rich and poor. The recent school attackers "think they were

unfairly treated by the society," he explained.

The April 29 attack in Taixing, in which at least 32 people were injured, received considerably less media attention. According to the New York-based Chinese television station NTDTV, Beijing instructed news outlets to refer only to reports from the state news agency Xinhua and to bury the stories so as not to undermine the Shanghai World Expo.

A leaked instruction issued by the news department of major Internet company Sina.com read: "In regards to the Taixing Kindergarten Injury Incident, notice has been received from higher levels that Xinhua reports are to be uniformly adopted. In light of the World Expo opening, this news shall not be placed on the front page for the time being ..." In other words, nothing could be permitted to interfere with the \$US59 billion extravaganza in Shanghai. (See "The Shanghai World Expo: capitalist extravagance on top of social misery").

The school attacks are a symptom of the social contradictions underlying the growth of Chinese capitalism. Whilst a tiny layer of super-rich has emerged, the vast majority of Chinese workers and rural poor are mired in poverty. The school attacks reveal the enormous pressure on individuals who are unable to cope, and lash out at innocent victims with tragic consequences.



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