

Macau police attack May Day demonstrators

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5 May 2010

Police provocations against a May Day demonstration in Macau SAR (special administrative region), China, resulted in over 40 injuries. Marchers were barred from entering a main business street that was on the route requested by the demonstrators. Barricades and a phalanx of riot police confronted the protesters as they neared the downtown street.

Police used pepper spray and a water canon to disperse the protesters. Workers responded with sticks, flag staffs and plastic bottles. A stand-off ensued well into the night. A protest leader, Lee Sio Kuan, of the Macau Workers' Power Union, was arrested at 3:00 a.m. and accused of assaulting a tourist, a charge he vigorously denied.

This was the biggest provocation against May Day protesters since 2007, when 6,000 workers clashed with police, who attempted to break up the assembled workers prior to their march and rally. A policeman fired a shot in the air, wounding a motorcyclist riding on a fly-over 300 meters away.

The 2010 May Day march and rally was organized by a loosely connected group of trade unions, labor associations and civic groups. Their demands focused on better working conditions, protection of local manpower, measures against "illegal" workers, measures regarding imported labor and affordable housing, and reunions for families divided by bureaucratic restrictions that prevent family members born in mainland China from joining their relatives in the SAR.

The demands for measures against "illegal" workers and government imported labor schemes reflected government collusion with building contractors and casino owners who have pitted local workers against workers from the mainland. Mainland workers are paid

less money and are housed in appalling conditions without basic sanitation. These migrant workers are spirited off by the contractors when they are alerted in advance of government raids.

Higher paid local laborers are often hired to work on the multi-billion dollar construction sites only to be fired after a few months and replaced by cheaper laborers. In the first quarter of 2010, unskilled construction workers in Macau suffered a 12.3 percent decrease in earnings while inflation caused all construction workers to lose 1.9 percent in purchasing power. At the same time, Macau's overall casino gross revenue increased 57.4 percent to 40.9 billion *patacas* (about 5.1 billion US dollars).

Other May Day demonstrations in Macau included a first-time protest of youth and young adults who organized on *Facebook*. This group, named "May Day Teenagers to Stand Up," rallied over 700 participants to voice discontent with "civil society" and especially the publicly funded TV and local press. It accused the media of presenting only one side of the news in which the enormous amount of revenue generated from the casinos was touted to promote the impression of a "prosperous, harmonious society."

The youth group's criticism focused on the lack of employment opportunities and affordable housing. The property market in Macau has surged with luxury

apartments, offered for rent or sale at grossly inflated prices, with little within reach of the vast majority of Macau residents. Construction of government subsidized home-ownership apartments has been promised and then promptly put on hold.

A local migrant worker group also rallied on May Day to call on the government to "stop pitting local workers against migrant workers," and to establish a

minimum wage in Macau. The abuses of migrant/or imported workers are widespread. A new law, which recently went into effect, purports to set minimum contract and work standards; however, it is unevenly enforced, if at all. Workers are penalized if they leave employers who violate contracts and are not allowed to re-enter Macau for six months.

Corruption in government basically leaves all imported workers vulnerable to the demands of the investors, developers, and government bureaucracy.

This corruption has been exacerbated by the enormous growth of the gambling industry in the city, confirming the old axiom, “wherever gambling goes, so does corruption.”

Right now, Macau is known as the “Monte Carlo” of the Orient, as it has become the gambling Mecca of Asia, rivaling both the European city and Las Vegas. In fact, a large part of its economy has become dependent on gambling, which had been legalized as far back as 1847 by the Portuguese colonial government in a bid to boost revenues.

In the early sixties, a group of businessmen from Hong Kong and Macau joined together to form a syndicate to put pressure on the government, still under Portuguese control, formed the *Sociedade de Turismo e Diversões de Macau* (STDM), and obtained the right to monopolize all gambling in the colony.

In the intervening years, this group has introduced all sorts of changes to the casinos based on western-style gambling and campaigned to promote them in Hong Kong and far and wide. Millions took the ferry across the bay from the ex-British colony and flocked to the Macau casinos, making gambling a mainstay of Macau’s economy.

Thousands of students from the universities have left their studies and gone to work for the gambling houses, which have apparently afforded them better salaries than their professions would otherwise have paid them.

But Macau’s stability since gambling became its mainstay was at best temporary and covered an inescapable fact: gambling is an entrenched field, quite impervious to change, either technological or otherwise. More importantly, it produces no growth, as it is not based on the production of real commodities. Adding to its problems is its dependence, now more than ever, on the prosperous elite of other Asian nations and cities, particularly Hong Kong—all of which are

staring economic disaster in the face.

The economic crisis has already begun to boomerang on Macau. With the May Day disturbances, it has joined the rest of the world in experiencing the upsurge of the international class struggle.

However, the gambling industry is also a source of instability in the Macau economy, as the nature of this business is not susceptible to technological advancement or productivity growth. The gambling industry is still dependent on the prosperity of other Asian economies, especially that of Hong Kong.



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