

# As Chinese premier urges “respect” for workers, police prepare crackdown

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The Chinese regime is clearly nervous about the country’s recent wave of strikes. Premier Wen Jiabao made a much-publicised tour this week of orphanages, low-income households and construction sites in Beijing, greeting rural migrant workers and praising their role in building the Chinese economy. At the same time, the ministry of public security has sent out orders to the police to prepare to suppress social conflict.

Now promoted as “Grandpa Wen,” the premier is playing a practiced role—presenting a humane face for the regime as he did in seeking to pacify the victims of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and this year’s Qinghai earthquake. In this case, Wen’s show of concern for rural migrant workers follows strikes in May and June, especially of Honda auto workers, over pay and conditions and a spate of suicides at Foxconn’s gigantic electronics plant in southern China.

Speaking to construction workers building a subway station, Wen declared: “Rural migrant workers are the mainstay of China’s industrial workforce. Our society’s wealth and the skyscrapers are distillations of your hard work and sweat. Your labour is glorious and should be respected by society at large.” The government and society at large had to treat “young migrant workers like their own children,” he declared.

Wen’s declaration of “respect” is completely hypocritical. The tens of millions of rural workers who have migrated to the cities are the most exploited layers of the working class. Not only are migrant workers poorly paid but discriminated against. The household registration system denies them the rights of urban residents and access to essential services. A worker from Hubei province told Wen that despite living in Beijing for eight years, he was still unable to buy a home or send his child

to a proper urban school. Wen acknowledged that this was a problem for migrant workers throughout China and promised to address the issue—but only “gradually”.

Wen’s tour made headlines in all the major newspapers, especially in the official *Southern Daily* and *Guangzhou Daily* in Guangdong province, where the Honda strikes erupted. A strike at Honda’s transmission plant that paralysed the company’s assembly plants for two weeks was followed by strikes in its exhaust system and lock factories. Young workers not only demanded higher pay, but challenged the state-controlled All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), which functions as an industrial police force for the regime.

The first two strikes finally ended after Honda offered significant pay rises. Honda Lock strikers only agreed to return to work on Tuesday, on a temporary basis. They are threatening to strike again if management fails to deliver a satisfactory response to their demands by today.

Wen’s public relations exercise was also aimed at demonstrating to big business and foreign investors that the government is in control. The international financial press has been closely following the strikes at Honda, which have prompted other workers in Shenzhen, Shanghai and Xian to strike for higher wages and improved conditions.

Willy Lam, an academic at Japan’s Akita International University, commented in the *Wall Street Journal* on Monday that “Beijing is running out of options to constrain demands for higher wages”. The situation was so grave, he explained, that top leaders, including the Chinese president Hu Jintao, were “personally handling the worsening domestic crisis”.

“In unpublicised, closed door talks on the labour situation, Mr. Hu and other Politburo members have cited late patriarch Deng Xiaoping’s warnings about how Poland’s Solidarity Movement undermined Communist Parties throughout the former Eastern Bloc,” Lam wrote. “The CCP leader has sent reinforcements of riot police and the paramilitary People’s Armed Police to Shenzhen, Zhongshan, Guangzhou and other cities worst hit by labour woes. While these heavily equipped law-enforcement officers are now on ‘standby’ status, they may swing into action to crush prolonged labour militancy, including the widespread formation of ‘illegal’ trade unions.”

Lam pointed out that members of a new generation of 100 million young migrant workers born in the 1980s and 1990s are demanding much more than their parents and have access to communications technology, making it easier for them to organise. “Unless China’s Communist Party leadership is willing to make fundamental changes to how the economic and political pie is allocated, it risks a wholesale rebellion that could tear asunder the country’s already tenuous social fabric,” he concluded.

The comment reflects Wall Street’s fear that a “wholesale rebellion” by Chinese workers would be a fundamental threat to world capitalism. Given their dependence on China’s vast cheap labour production, international corporations will not hesitate to support police-state suppression of working class unrest, as they did during and after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.

The public security ministry has ordered police throughout China to identify and resolve social conflicts at an early stage—in other words, to suppress them to prevent the growth of a mass movement. Vice Minister of Public Security Zhang Xinfeng declared: “China, during a process of social and economic transformation, is facing emerging social conflicts and new problems in social security. Police at all levels must fully realise the complexity of the problem.”

An editorial in Hong Kong’s *Ming Pao Daily News* on June 14 pointed to some of the underlying causes of discontent. “Rising prices and housing costs have caused a decline of living standards among sections of workers. This might not be felt by outsiders, but Chinese workers have strong personal experiences about it,” it stated.

“This wave of strikes is only the tip of the iceberg of workers’ discontent, and large increases of wages by foreign firms can only suppress the discontent temporarily. The real volcano is the restless sentiments hidden in the society at large over all kinds of social injustices.”

The majority of factory owners pay basic wages just in line with the minimum wage system established in 2004, and the pay is so low that workers can only survive by doing large amounts of overtime. Under the impact of the global financial crisis, the government suspended the minimum wage increase for 2009. In the country’s three most expensive cities—Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen—the minimum wage has been increased to about \$US160 a month, but it still lags far behind the rapidly rising costs of housing, food and other necessities.

Official statistics put overall price rises in May at 3.1 percent compared to a year earlier, with the price of food items up by 6.1 percent. Driven by speculative investment, property prices across 70 cities rose 12.4 percent in May compared to a year earlier, adding to the housing costs for working people. Writing in China’s business magazine *Caixin*, economist Andy Xie noted that inflation had “severely eroded income value,” then commented that today’s young adults were less willing to “eat bitterness” than their parents.

Wen’s public relations exercise in Beijing will do nothing to alleviate the plight of tens of millions of migrant workers whose living standards are worsening and who are treated as second-class citizens. That is why behind Wen’s platitudes, the government is readying its police apparatus for a confrontation with the working class.



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