

# Chinese police shoot protesting construction workers

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Hong Kong's Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy reported that last Sunday, riot police in China's Wuzhou City in the southwestern Guangxi province opened fire on 100 construction workers demonstrating over unpaid wages.

The Information Centre said a local hospital officer had confirmed that about 20 people were sent to hospital, including five who sustained gunshot wounds. No deaths were reported. Chinese web sites circulated photos showing workers confronting the riot police before the shooting.

Workers from a residential construction site in Cangwu County had headed to Wuzhou City and staged a demonstration in front of the municipal government building. According to Japan's Kyodo news agency, the construction contractor owed workers one million yuan or \$US151,000 in wages, but had fled to the adjacent Guangdong province after the construction was finished.

The workers demanded that the government come to their aid. Hong Kong's *Oriental Daily* reported that they held banners stating: "In the trust of the party and the government to hold justice for us, get our sweat and blood money back."

As the workers marched on, about 1,000 onlookers joined them. Instead of "justice" from the government, however, more than 100 heavily-armed riot police met them. As the crowd continued to grow, the police fired warning shots into the sky and then opened fire on the workers with rubber bullets and tear gas. Apart from those who were shot, scores were injured during the resulting panic, and the police arrested several

protesters.

The Chinese authorities sought to cover up the incident. *Oriental Daily* said the Cangwu Public Security Bureau had confirmed that there was a demonstration, but refused to elaborate due to "high secrecy". A Wuzhou police department spokesman told the Kyodo news agency there had been an "illegal march", but refused to confirm whether the police had opened fire.

The protest took place as tens of millions of migrant workers started the annual mass return to their rural homes for the Chinese New Year. After a year of hard labour, this is the only time that workers can see their families and bring back home their limited savings. The construction companies are notorious for paying workers only once a project has been completed, as a means of keeping the workforce subservient to the management. Employers are known to disappear to avoid paying up. Often, they hire thugs to attack workers demanding unpaid wages. This time, by mobilising riot police, a municipal government acted on the behalf of the employer.

It was the second major reported incident in four days in which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime responded to labour unrest with brutal police-state repression. On January 19, around 1,000 riot police clashed with garment workers in Wuhan protesting over the corrupt privatisation of their factory.

The state-owned Wuhan 3541 Garment General Factory in Hubei province used to produce uniforms for the Chinese army before it went bankrupt four years ago. The factory laid off 4,000 workers in 2007. Hong

Kong's *Sun Daily* reported that after the company was liquidated, its workers had organised to take over parts of the firm with their own money, aiming to produce civilian clothing.

However, the employees had not received a promised settlement fund of nearly 400 million yuan from the central government in Beijing. After years of waiting, workers suspected that government officials had retained the funds. Workers' anger exploded after hearing that parts of the factory's land and assets recently had been sold to private businesses for just 100,000 yuan (\$15,381), far less than the original valuation of more than 70 million yuan (\$10 million).

On January 13, when the head of the government office dealing with bankruptcy and compensation matters went to the factory to negotiate with workers, he was detained for failing to deliver on the promises to pay them. The official was kept in the factory compound, guarded by dozens of workers.

About 200 riot police officers stormed the factory on January 17, causing a scuffle with workers, which resulted in the beating of an elderly employee. Four others were also injured. The police attack and the rumoured death of the veteran worker triggered a response by an estimated 1,500 enraged workers, who blocked the factory gate and one of the main traffic routes nearby.

Protesters demanded the pledged 30,000-40,000 yuan payment in housing subsidy and moving allowance for each worker, as well as a clear accounting of the firm's assets and finances. Workers clashed with about 1,000 riot police, and an elderly female worker was injured. Even after the crackdown hundreds of workers continued a sit-in strike.

The Chinese state media has been silent on the incident. According to the *Sun Daily*, Internet police quickly deleted any message on the event posted by Internet users or bloggers.

The vicious response of the Chinese authorities to the protests is rooted in the fear that rising prices of food, basic necessities and housing, which have seriously

eroded the living standards of the working people, could trigger a broader anti-government movement. There has also been media silence over the uprising in Tunisia, due to concerns that Chinese workers and rural poor could follow the example.

A Japanese daily newspaper, *Asahi Shimbun*, warned last week that a new generation of "rights-conscious" Chinese workers had become the core of the workforce due to the widespread use of the Internet. These workers "can no longer be characterised as silent and cheap," it commented. Last May-June, a wave of strikes was initiated by young workers in Japanese auto giant Honda's plants in southern China.

In order to placate the growing discontent, over the past two months Beijing and a number of other cities have announced increases in official minimum wages—the salaries paid to China's 200 million migrant workers. These minor concessions are insufficient, however, to compensate for rising prices.

The violent repression of protesting workers in Wuzhou and Wuhan demonstrates that the CCP regime's only answer to any opposition from the working class is to resort to police-state measures.



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