

Angry protests erupt among Chinese workers

John Chan
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Thousands of migrant workers in the Zengcheng district of Guangzhou have been involved in three days of protests and battles with police from last Friday. The eruption in the capital city of southern Chinese province of Guangdong is another sign of mounting social tensions, fuelled by declining living standards for workers.

Several thousand police were deployed to Zengcheng, a satellite industrial town where one-sixth of the world's jeans are manufactured. The riots were triggered by urban administration security personnel who pushed Wang Lianmei, a 20-year-old pregnant street vendor, to the ground as they tried to clear her stall from a road last Friday.

The woman and her husband are from Sichuan, a major "labour exporting" province. Corrupt security officers have long treated migrant workers as second-class citizens, demanding fines and bribes for minor offences. Because of China's urban household registration system, the country's 150 million rural migrant workers have no basic rights such as access to education for their children.

The attack on Wang quickly led to rumours that she and her husband had been killed. The incident ignited pent-up anger among factory workers, who have been hit by sharply rising food prices and housing costs.

According to Hong Kong's *Singtao Daily*, a group of Sichuan migrant workers attacked police cars when Wang was taken away by ambulance. Large crowds joined in. At least three police cars and an ambulance were destroyed.

On Saturday evening, a protest by 100 workers in front of the local security office quickly attracted more than 1,000 people. A shop owner told the *South China Morning Post*: "People attacked the government office and finally burned it down." Some 25 people were arrested after riot police arrived, armed with shields and armoured vehicles.

While the police insisted that the situation was under control, about 1,000 migrant workers protested again on

Sunday, defying the heavy police presence. The demonstrators smashed cars and buildings and marched toward Phoenix City, "an upmarket residential complex where ranks of police could be seen forming a human barricade to defend the densely populated area," the *South China Morning Post* noted.

Reuters reported that mobile phone video footage taken by locals "showed thousands of angry demonstrators setting fire to government buildings, smashing police vehicles and clashing with riot police during the weekend." The footage showed police firing tear gas, deploying armoured vehicles to disperse the protesters and handcuffing demonstrators.

The Chinese authorities also sought to patch up public relations. Wang's husband appeared at a Guangzhou municipal government press conference, insisting that his wife and unborn baby were in a good shape. Zengcheng mayor Wang Ye maintained that the incident was "just an ordinary clash between street vendors and local public security people" which was "used by a handful of people who wanted to cause trouble."

In reality, the regime was well aware that wide layers of migrant workers were involved. Officials held a meeting on Monday with managers of 1,200 businesses and ordered them to prevent their employees joining any protests. "Get your own houses in order and act on your own to maintain social stability," the managers were told.

Only a few days earlier, 200 migrant workers in another Cantonese city, Chaozhou, had demonstrated outside a township government building. The rally evolved into a riot by thousands of workers, in which four cars were destroyed. Police arrested nine people.

The Chaozhou incident erupted after several relatives and the son of a migrant worker from Sichuan demanded 3,000 yuan (\$US435) in back pay from his employer. The father was beaten and the son's hands and feet were slashed by the boss and two men. The next day, workers gathered at the

government building to demand the arrest of the attackers. Instead, several protesters were detained, sparking further anger. The boss and his two aides were only arrested on Sunday after the protests had erupted in Zengcheng, raising government fears of a broader movement among workers.

In another confrontation, 2,000 protesters stormed the government building in Lichuan city in Hubei province over the death of former local legislator Ran Jianxin, who had been investigating government corruption in lucrative land transactions. Ran was under police interrogation and died on June 4—the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in which the Stalinist regime brutally put down anti-government protests with troops and tanks.

The *New York Times* reported that online photos of Ran's bloodied corpse "set off a large demonstration on Thursday by crowds throwing eggs, bottles and garbage at city buildings. The protest drew a large contingent of the paramilitary People's Armed police and columns of armoured vehicles." In order to placate the public anger, two local officials were detained and another two were dismissed.

These events are among many indicators of rising dissatisfaction. Last month, thousands of students and herders in Inner Mongolia staged demonstrations for days over the deaths of one herder and a local resident who were killed while protesting against coal mining operations. In April, thousands of truck drivers in Shanghai staged strikes over rising fees and fuel prices.

The unrest is rooted in the mounting contradictions of the Chinese economy. The consumer price index released on Tuesday showed that inflation hit a 34-month high of 5.5 percent annualised. Food price rises hit 11.7 percent, severely affecting working class households.

At the same time, the efforts of the Chinese regime to counter inflation have led to a credit crunch hitting small and medium-sized enterprises that employ tens of millions of workers. Since October, the central banks have lifted interest rates four times and increased bank reserve ratios eight times to curb lending.

On the eve of the latest riots, the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce warned that cash shortages threatened factory closures on a similar scale to those following the 2008 global financial meltdown, when 20 million migrant workers lost their jobs.

There are signs that a new wave of strikes may have commenced. Zengcheng is only a few kilometres from Japanese auto giant Honda's manufacturing facilities, where strikes erupted last year over low wages. Pay rises granted then have been eroded by rising prices.

More than 400 workers at a South Korean-owned Kumho tyre factory in the north-eastern city of Changchun staged a stoppage from June 8 to 12. They complained that 80 percent of workers receive a basic wage of just 870-950 yuan (\$134-\$147) per month, with few benefits. The municipal government ended the dispute by permitting a 800-yuan wage rise and promising not to penalise workers for their industrial action. The authorities fear there will be strikes in the other three Kumho factories in China as well as other companies, as happened after the Honda stoppages last year.

The latest unrest has rattled the international corporate circles that depend heavily on the super-exploitation of Chinese workers. The *Wall Street Journal* warned that "a wave of violent unrest in urban areas of China over the past three weeks is testing the Communist Party's efforts to maintain control over an increasingly complex and fractious society."

Beijing's police-state measures to put down the unrest suggest that this spectre is indeed haunting the government, which is determined to show the global corporate CEOs that it will do whatever it takes to suppress the discontent. An editorial in the state-run *Global Times* on Monday stridently insisted: "China is not a nation where public anger collectively seeks to topple the existing order. It is time to debunk this ludicrous lie."

The obvious fear in ruling circles is that the present isolated protests will coalesce into a broad anti-government movement that could topple the present regime as has occurred in the Middle East and North Africa.



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