

Clashes highlight the plight of migrant workers in China

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A huge police presence in Zengcheng, a satellite town of the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, has temporarily suppressed any further unrest over the past days, following angry protests by thousands of rural migrant workers last weekend.

On Monday and Tuesday, 2,000 riot police armed with shields, batons and shotguns paraded in a one-kilometre column through the streets of Xintang district, in a deliberate attempt to intimidate workers. Heavily-armed police set up checkpoints at major road intersections and a curfew was imposed throughout the town.

The protests were triggered last Friday when local government security personnel pushed a pregnant woman to the ground while removing small vendors from the front of a supermarket. Such are the social tensions in Zengcheng that the incident triggered rumours that the woman and her husband had been killed, igniting anger among migrant workers who face systematic abuse by police. Protesters clashed with riot police, burnt government buildings and smashed police cars.

A local shop owner told Agence France Presse on Wednesday: "It was very scary—the scariest thing I have encountered since I was born." He reported that thousands of rioters had clashed with police. "Together they flipped police cars and set them on fire. A few hundred policemen then came. They started beating people indiscriminately with metal batons."

Just days before the unrest in Zengcheng, similar protests erupted among migrant workers over unpaid wages in the city of Chaozhou, also in Guangdong province.

Yesterday, the Guangzhou police bureau announced that a man had been arrested for spreading the rumour online that the Zengcheng vendor had died. Officially, 25 protesters have been arrested. However, according to online eyewitness

accounts, 1,000 people have been detained, out of up to 10,000 who took part in the Zengcheng protests.

To justify the police repression and stoke up ethnic divisions, attempts are being made to demonise "separatists" from Tibet and Xinjiang as the "black hand" behind the protests. The Hong Kong-based *Ming Pao* reported that local authorities handed out steel pipes and helmets to male residents and called on them to organise their "self-defence".

This incitement to ethnic violence against rural migrants is a deliberate attempt to divert attention from the real issues behind protests, which stem from China's deepening social polarisation, endemic official corruption and police-state repression.

A State Council Development Research Centre report issued on Tuesday acknowledged that the country's 150 million rural migrant workers "are marginalised in the cities, treated as mere cheap labour, not absorbed by cities but even neglected, discriminated against and harmed." It warned policy-makers: "If mishandled, this situation will create a major destabilising threat."

Beijing's answer is police repression. The Hong Kong-based *Oriental Daily* reported on Tuesday that central government officials held emergency meetings over the protests, "considered the situation as serious, and ordered the local authorities to carry out harsh repression." The argument presented, according to the newspaper, was "kill one to scare one hundred." The report paraphrased Zhang Jun, a deputy head of the Supreme Peoples Court, as saying "criminal elements extremely hostile to the state and society must be punished with the death penalty, with absolutely no mercy."

The *Oriental Daily* noted that migrant workers in Zengcheng had suppressed their anger in the face of a

massive police presence, but were “preparing economic revenge in a second wave of struggle.” It reported that workers were calling via the Internet for a month-long strike, “to economically bring down the ‘Capital of Jeans’ ... in order to take revenge against the local law enforcement personnel and the wealthy layer’s prolonged exploitation of migrant workers.”

Xintang district is dubbed the “Jeans Capital”. Its 400,000-500,000 migrant workers form the bulk of a workforce that produces more than 200 million pairs of jeans or about one sixth of the total global production. The fear in Chinese ruling circles is that any further protests by migrant workers in Zengcheng will spread throughout the entire Pearl River Delta region—the heartland of China’s manufacturing export industries.

A jeans factory worker from Sichuan told the *Wall Street Journal* that the protests “could start again—people are still very angry. The government doesn’t care our problems.” Another worker explained: “We don’t want trouble with the police.” He went on to complain about the impact of rising food prices and the problem of unpaid wages.

The average monthly wage for garment workers is about 2,000 yuan (\$US309). The income of farmers in Sichuan is less than half that amount. However, migrant workers face sweatshop conditions and long hours. Most work at least 10 hours a day, seven days a week, and wages are not always paid on time.

On top of these hardships, they are treated as second-class citizens with no residential rights or access to basic services in the cities where they work. They face constant discrimination by local authorities and police harassment. Moreover, the local government security squads often charge fees and demand bribes over various minor offences

A female worker from Sichuan told the *South China Morning Post* that she had become “desensitised” to police brutality, as it happened every day. “When I first came, I was very scared to see migrant workers being beaten up and left half dead, but now I’m used to it.”

Her work involved cutting loose threads off completed jeans. She earned 0.15 yuan per pair and was lucky to finish 300 pairs, working from 6 a.m. to the midnight. “That would earn me about 30 yuan a day,” she said, “but foreign orders have been infrequent since April.” At off-peak times, she earned just 450 yuan a month and rent took more than half her wage.

Another man from Hubei told the Hong Kong-based newspaper that local government security personnel showed no patience with outsiders: “Migrant workers and peasants are ignorant about urban rules and regulations, but there is really no need to punish people by beating them up when they break a rule or two ... Those security people are ruthless and have been barbaric for a very long time.”

Amid deepening global economic turmoil, especially in China’s largest export markets in Europe and the US, migrant workers will inevitably be squeezed even harder.

The US thinktank Stratfor warned: “Though spreading protests are not necessarily expected in Sichuan [the home province of the protesting migrants], economic troubles and lack of profit in many small- and medium-sized Chinese factories—which in turn leads to unpaid wages—and the resulting problems for migrant labourers, will probably cause more issues in Guangdong in the near future.”

Other commentators voiced concern about the potential for social unrest across China. The *Financial Times* warned on Wednesday that social tensions were now so sharp that providing wage rises, as happened following the strikes last year initiated by Honda workers, would no longer work. “Buying off strikers is child’s play, however, compared with dealing with ever larger numbers of people who believe Chinese society to be manifestly unjust,” the newspaper wrote.

These comments underscore the fear in international financial circles that uncoordinated protests could evolve into a broader political movement of the working class against not only the Chinese Communist Party regime, but also the capitalist foundations on which it rests.



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