

Police crack down on two strikes in China

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Authorities sent in police to end two significant strikes by workers in China's southern Guangdong province last week. Far from winning any concessions on wages and conditions, the outcome of the strikes indicates that the Beijing regime cannot tolerate any industrial action that could ignite wider struggles, like the Honda auto strikes did a year ago.

The crackdown came just two weeks after migrant garment workers in the Zengcheng district of Guangzhou, the province's capital, had engaged in days of protests, smashing government buildings and clashing with riot police, against police violence, official discrimination and surging prices.

A four-day strike by 4,000 workers at a South Korean-owned handbag factory in Guangzhou's Panyu district ended last week when police arrested six workers. Female migrant workers from inland provinces make up 80 percent of the workforce at Simone Limited, which supplies high-end international brands, such as Michael Kors, DKNY, Burberry and Kate Spade.

The Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* reported that workers at the company's Hualong plant struck last Monday, demanding better pay and an end to management abuses. "A heavy police presence was seen outside the plant, with workers claiming that at least one woman and one man were beaten up by local security guards on Tuesday," the newspaper noted. "A large traffic jam also developed outside the factory, and pictures were posted on microblog websites."

Workers told the newspaper their average basic monthly wage was only 1,100 yuan (\$US169)—the minimum wage for Guangzhou's satellite industrial cities. They were demanding a rise to 1,300 yuan because of rapidly rising prices. A 26-year-old male

worker from Hunan province explained: "From our salary, the company also deducts 200 yuan for social security and 100 yuan for food if we dine inside the plant. The food is like trash there and unfit for human consumption, but we have no choice."

Workers said they had to stand for 12 hours a day, had only one toilet break every four hours, and were banned from drinking water except during breaks. A young male worker from Chongqing said the management treated workers as "less than human beings," adding: "The male managers walk into female toilets any time they please; we can't contain our anger anymore."

Most workers returned to work by Thursday morning, without any concessions from the management, but about 900 remained on strike. More than six strikers were taken away by the police last Thursday afternoon during a scuffle. Simone management handed out threatening notices to workers, warning that those who did not return to work would lose their employment contracts.

The *South China Morning Post* reported: "A 20-year-old female worker was grabbed by the neck, roughed up and dragged away by a few men after telling one officer to stop taking photographs of her." Her 18-year-old colleague told the newspaper: "They are thugs, photographing us, beating us anyway they please." A young male worker was chased by several officers through the crowd and eventually tackled to the ground before he was taken away.

The underlying resentment among workers remains unresolved. A 19-year-old worker explained that they were simply demanding a pay rise in line with many nearby factories. A 29-year-old worker from Guizhou

who had his thumb crushed by machinery two months ago complained that the company had refused to pay the medical costs on the ground that he might have deliberately injured himself to claim compensation.

Last Thursday also, just as police broke up the Simone strike, hundreds of police were sent to Japanese-owned Citizen Watch plant at Dongguan, another major manufacturing city in Guangdong, to end a 10-day strike by 2,000 workers. According to Hong Kong's *Asiaweek* magazine, the strikers were forced to return to work under strict police surveillance.

The strike had erupted after the management forced employees to work on a weekend for no extra payment because a power blackout on the previous Wednesday, which had stopped production, had been deemed "a day off". Given the frequent power outages in recent months, this caused anger among workers, who are regularly forced to do 5-6 hours overtime a day. Their wages are also withheld if they are 10 minutes late for a shift, and they lack basic safety gear such as gloves.

On June 13, a thousand workers had protested in heavy rain outside the local Chang'an township government headquarters against Citizen Watch's violation of labour laws. A hundred police were sent in and the government labour department intervened.

After the company made a vague promise to "improve" the rescheduling of working days, about 600 employees returned to work. Last Tuesday, the management threatened to withhold three day's wages for each day of strike, forcing most strikers back to work. Some 200 polishing department workers remained defiant, however, until Thursday's police operation.

The lack of any concessions to workers in both strikes is a sharp contrast to last year's Honda strikes. Honda initially responded to a strike at its transmission plant in Foshan, near Guangzhou, by initially rejecting wage rises and demanding that workers sign a "no-strike" pledge. In a bid to contain the situation, however, the company eventually offered limited pay increases. This settlement encouraged workers in other Honda factories and auto and electronics companies to

take similar action, creating a wave of strikes that forced Beijing to lift minimum wages across the country.

The Chinese Stalinist regime was largely caught off guard by the strikes a year ago. Now, however, amid the revolutionary upheavals in the Middle East, a further downturn in the global economy, and a surge in inflation in China, Beijing is determined to nip any workers' movement in the bud.

During this month's riots in Zengcheng, 6,000 paramilitary police with armoured vehicles attacked up to 10,000 workers, formally arresting at least 19. Last week, the police offered "rewards" of up to 10,000 yuan in cash, as well as entitlements to local urban household registration, to migrant workers who provided information on suspected protesters.



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