

# Mass protest forces Chinese authorities to shut petrochemical plant

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A protest involving thousands of people last Sunday forced the authorities in the north-eastern Chinese city of Dalian to announce the closure of a major petrochemical facility. The event, sparked by residents' fears that toxic materials would leak from the plant during a typhoon, is a further indication of sharp social tensions and the significant role of the Internet in organising protests against the Stalinist regime and the corporate elite that it represents.

Owned by Fujia Petrochemical Company, the \$1.5 billion Dalian complex was only two-years-old. It manufactured paraxylene (known as PX), which is a key ingredient in the production of polyester, but is an eye and nose irritant and can cause damage to people's health, including their nervous systems.

The decision to close the plant came just hours after Dalian Communist Party Secretary Tang Jun, standing on top of a police van, had failed to disperse a huge crowd in the People's Square outside the government compound. The authorities said 12,000 people had gathered, but the *South China Morning Post* reported that the number could have been in the hundreds of thousands. Hundreds of riot police officers confronted the protesters, but did not attempt to use force.

Tang then promised to relocate the facility sometime in the future, but was met with demands for an exact date. The British *Guardian* reported that mobile phone pictures uploaded online showed protesters holding banners declaring: "I love Dalian and reject poison", "Return me my home and garden," and "Get out PX, protect Dalian."

Fearing the movement would escalate, and trigger wider social and political discontent, an emergency municipal government meeting was held in the afternoon, leading to the closure announcement. Despite the apparent concession to the protesters, the regime deployed special police officers later in the evening, according to Hong Kong's *Ming Pao*

*Daily*. They reportedly beat demonstrators who refused to leave the square.

Fujia is the second largest private taxpayer to the Liaoning provincial government. Established in 2000, the company was strongly backed by the provincial and municipal governments, which had afforded it "Golden Tiger" and "Grand Dragon" awards for generating economic growth and for being a "civilised" enterprise. The fast-growing group—its revenues have doubled each year—was one of China's top 500 enterprises in 2010. Fujia's president and CEO Wang Yizheng was named by a local newspaper group as one of the "top ten" business figures in the province this year.

Thus to shut down one of Fujia's plants was a major blow, not just to the company, but the Liaoning government's finances. The decision was undoubtedly motivated by political considerations, most likely conveyed from Beijing, to the effect that the Dalian authorities had to quickly end the demonstration before it became a vehicle for other grievances, such as rising prices and chronic unemployment.

On August 9, just five days before the Dalian demonstration, about 10,000 people had rioted in Qianxi County in Guizhou province, incensed by the rough handling of an elderly woman by urban administration officials who confiscated her motorbike. Angry crowds burned five police vehicles, and set government buildings ablaze. Two days later, another social eruption took place in Hebei province's Shijiazhuang city after a drunken police officer smashed a taxi and beat its driver. Ultimately, a thousand protesters clashed with a hundred special police officers who had been sent in as reinforcements.

The protest in Dalian was doubly troubling for the regime because north-eastern China, a centre of former state industry, has been a hotbed of militant struggles by industrial workers over the past decade due to the wholesale

privatisation of basic industry and destruction of jobs. In 2002, tens of thousands of laid-off oil workers in Daqing, Heilongjiang province, demonstrated against the elimination of jobs and entitlements. In 2009, 30,000 steelworkers staged a stormy protest in Tonghua city, Jilin province, during which a company executive was killed, to oppose the sale of their plant to a private company.

Dalian has become a rapidly growing industrial hub, with major transnational corporations like chip manufacturer Intel and tyre maker Goodyear operating in the city, alongside privatised companies in steel, petrochemicals and heavy manufacturing. Beijing evidently feared that police repression directed against the demonstrators would ignite a wider movement throughout the city's working class.

Also of grave concern to the regime was that the protest developed quickly last week via microblogging and social networking sites, following the unexpected arrival of a powerful typhoon, Muifa.

When the storm hit the port city, residents feared that the sea walls around the Fujia plant would be flooded and damaged. Online postings drew comparisons with Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, which was swamped by the March 11 tsunami. Muifa did breach the sea wall at the perimeter of the Fujia plant's 20 large storage tanks. Locals were evacuated and 400 truckloads of rocks were sent to rebuild the walls.

While officials assured residents that the dyke had been restored and nothing had spilled, local people were distrustful, especially following the July 23 Wenzhou bullet train collision that killed 40 people. Beijing's attempts to cover up the details of that crash have intensified the popular suspicion of the official whitewashing of all major accidents. In order to placate public anger, the Chinese government has ordered a month-long high speed rail safety campaign, and significantly lowered the maximum speeds and ticket prices for bullet trains.

Photographs of an initial gathering of protesters in Dalian early on Sunday morning were circulated on the Internet, attracting mostly young people to the scene. The movement was modelled on a June 2007 demonstration in Xiamen, a special economic zone in Fujian province, where locals sent text messages encouraging friends to meet for a "walk" to complain about another paraxylene plant, forcing it to relocate two years later.

Similar calls to "walk" have emerged in other parts of

China, including those earlier this year proposing a "Jasmine Revolution" like the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Beijing is acutely aware of China's parallels with the dictatorial regimes in North Africa and Middle East, which also presided over rising prices and stark social inequality, and that anxiety has been reinforced by the social unrest in Europe and the US.

Last week's riots in Britain have also led to a wider discussion on Twitter-like sites, especially Weibo, with many participants comparing China's social conflicts to Britain's unrest. "In fact, China has riots more serious than England's every week," one comment cited by Reuters noted.

Alarmed that Chinese youth and workers are drawing these comparisons, Beijing is seeking to restrict Internet access among its 485 million Chinese users, many of whom are young workers. A section of the Chinese elite openly welcomed British Prime Minister David Cameron's threat to shut down Twitter and other social networking sites as a means of preventing the spread of social unrest.

An August 13 editorial by the state-run *Global Times* declared: "The economic and social turmoil in the US, Britain and France might trigger a worldwide groupthink and introspection on the boundaries of democracy and freedom of speech." It added: "Media in the US and Britain used to criticise developing countries for curbing freedom of speech. Britain's new attitude will help appease the quarrels between the East and West over the future management of the Internet." As for China itself, the editorial insisted, "advocates of an unlimited development of the Internet should think twice about their original ideas."

The comment is a warning to workers in China and beyond that, despite online celebrations of a "victory" in Dalian, forcing the closure of a petrochemical plant, intensified state repression is being prepared against any challenge from the working class.



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