Police lock down Chinese factory town to suppress protests

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A determined protest by rural migrant workers in Guangdong Province that began on June 26 has underscored the rising tensions between the region's multi-millioned workforce and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime.

The unrest erupted after a brawl in the township of Shaxi in Zhongshan city between a local 13-year-old school student and a 15-year old teenager of migrant background. Shaxi, which specialises in making casual clothes, is one of the numerous industrial towns in the Pearl River Delta, also known as the "world's factory."

The migrant youth was eventually detained by security guards, who reportedly beat him severely, injuring his face, before handing him to the police. A protest by his parents and their friends over the youth's treatment became a rallying point for pent-up anger against widespread official discrimination against migrant workers.

The initial demonstration involved a few hundred workers in front of the local police station, but rapidly escalated after police tried to disperse the crowd with batons. The news spread like wildfire. Thousands more rallied in support, including many from neighbouring cities such as Guangzhou and Foshan.

Liu Tianjin, a Shaxi factory worker, told Agence France-Presse: "The riots started noon [on Monday], but escalated late last night. Several thousand people were protesting. There were lots of riot police outside last night, and there are still many outside now. I can tell you more than 30 people were injured."

On Tuesday morning, about 10,000 workers surrounded the township government, facing off against 1,000 police. That night the authorities suddenly moved to disperse the protests by ordering the police to charge against the protestors (click here for video).

Police sealed off the town and the Shaxi and Zhongshan media issued warnings to the public to stay away from the town, as well as urging locals to remain indoors. Shops, schools and banks were all shut.

According to Hong Kong's *Ming Pao Daily*, tens of thousands of migrant workers, including from neighbouring cities, showed up to support the protests. Workers attacked police cars and police outposts as well as shops. A bus station was set on fire. The police indiscriminately attacked anyone in the street and local hospitals filled with the injured (see photos).

The newspaper, citing unnamed sources, reported that the central government in Beijing had authorised the police and troops to shoot workers if the unrest escalated. It deployed 10,000 police in Zhongshan, including large reinforcements from nearby cities to prevent any protest in the main city.

Chinese authorities have tried to downplay the incident. State-owned television broadcast the comments of the injured boy's father, who insisted that his son had suffered only minor injuries, not death as widely rumoured. He said that he did not know any of the protestors. To justify the police violence, the state media claimed that organised crime gangs were behind the protests.

The sudden eruption of protests is a product of systematic discrimination against migrant workers who

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are not given formal residential status in the city. They are treated as second class citizens without access to services and are subject to constant police harassment. In towns like Shaxi, where migrant workers outnumber locals, the government is not responsible for their education or health care. The official policy encourages local prejudice against migrants, including by the police, who often blame them for rising crime rates.

What happened in Shaxi is part of broader labour unrest in the same province. Last June, similar protests erupted involving thousands of migrant workers in the jean manufacturing centre of Zengcheng. Since November, there has been a wave of strikes in the province against wage cuts and attacks on working conditions.

Last weekend police violently broke up a factory occupation by 800 workers at Lituo Civilian Explosive Equipment in Shaoguan city, also in Guangdong. The former state-owned enterprise produces industrial explosives and detonators. Workers had been on strike since early May to protest against management plundering money belonging to workers when the company was sold last year. On June 22, workers blocked a road and sealed off the gate, preventing the managers from leaving. The government deployed hundreds of riot police, who attacked workers with tear gas and arrested several (see photo).

The underlying cause of the growing labour unrest is the sharp downturn in exports due to the worsening economic crisis in Europe and the lack of demand from the US. Guangdong's economy, which used to be the driving force for China as a whole, is now in deep trouble. Its exports and imports grew by only 5 percent in the first five months of the year compared to the same period last year—2.7 percentage points below the national average. Fixed asset investment has risen by just 9 percent in the same period—down by 9.9 percentage points from last year.

Cheng Jianshan of Guangdong Academy of Social Sciences told the China News Service on June 27 that the province's "troika" (exports, investment and consumption) was losing steam: "The contraction in foreign trade is undermining investor confidence, leading to weakness in fixed capital investment, which in turn affects consumer confidence and industrial added value."

Guangdong Communist Party chief Wang Yang last year promised workers a "happy Guangdong" after a series of violent protests, including in Zengcheng and also by villagers in Wukan who waged a protracted struggle against corrupt land sales.

However, facing falling profits, sweatshop owners are seeking to impose new burdens on workers through wage cuts and demands for higher productivity. The Guangdong government was expected to increase the official minimum wage earlier in the year. But under pressure from the Hong Kong manufacturers' lobby which employs millions of workers in the province, the government postponed the increases, provoking a wave of strikes.

On June 18, the 3,000-strong workforce at the Japanese-owned Citizen watch plant in Guangzhou went on strike demanding a pay increase. Their basic wage was just 1,100 yuan a month—the official minimum in Huadu district where the factory is located. After a 200-yuan deduction for social security, workers complained that they simply did not have enough to live on.

Workers at another Japanese electronics plant in Guangzhou were offered a pay rise from 1,350 yuan to 1,500 yuan a month on 1 June, but 1,000 went out on strike on June 14 saying the increase was not enough to make ends meet.

The brutal police state measures used against migrant workers this week in Zhongshan are rooted in the Chinese regime's fear that any ongoing protest could trigger far broader action by the highly concentrated working class in Guangdong and China's other industrial heartlands.

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