Mass protests force Chinese authorities to scrap industrial project

John Chan
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The Chinese government last week promised to abandon the construction of a $1.6 billion industrial plant in Sichuan province's Shifang city following mass protests.

Hongda Chemical, a subsidiary of the privately-owned Chinese resources conglomerate, Hongda Group, planned to refine copper ore from Tibet and Australia. The project consisted of a molybdenum processor with an annual capacity of 40,000 tonnes and a 400,000-tonnes-a-year copper cathode production line.

Like many industrial projects in China, the plant had been approved with little consideration for the wellbeing of the local population or the impact on the environment. Fears that the plant's emissions would destroy limited local water supplies or cause cancers made it a focal point of anger against the government.

A June 30 signing ceremony for the project unexpectedly became a trigger for three days of demonstrations, involving tens of thousands of local residents. Protesters sought to storm the Shifang government building and smashed police vehicles. Notably, their numbers included many high school and college students and other young people, who helped organise support for the rallies on-line.

The authorities deployed thousands of riot police armed with tear gas and stun grenades against the protest. At least 13 demonstrators were injured. Hong Kong's *Ming Pao Daily* reported that one high school student was killed. The police arrested 27 people—mostly students—for tearing down the government building's gate or throwing stones at police and officials (Click here for YouTube video on July 2 police attacks).

The protesters remained defiant, however, despite threats by the authorities that they had three days to turn themselves in, or face "severe punishment." One demonstrator, an 18-year-old saleswoman, told Reuters via phone: "We have so many people in Shifang. We aren't afraid of them [the authorities]. The Shifang people will definitely not surrender."

The determined struggle threatened to become a focal point of a wider movement against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime, under conditions of a slowing economy, falling living standards and a lack of jobs for young people. These economic reversals are feeding into resentment over the widening gap between ordinary people and the wealthy elite, presided over by a corrupt Stalinist bureaucracy.

Just last month, Guangdong province's Zhongshan city witnessed days of violent protests by thousands of migrant workers against their conditions and entrenched official discrimination (see: "Police lock down Chinese factory town to suppress protests").

By July 3, the Shifang authorities had shifted ground, releasing most detained protesters and halting work on the chemical plant. "Given the fact that some people are worried about the environmental impact and health hazards of the project and reacted fiercely, [we] have decided to stop construction on the plant and it will never be built in Shifang," the city's Communist Party chief, Li Chengjin, announced. Within days, Li himself was sidelined. The deputy mayor of Deyang city, which administers Shifang, took over his role in dealing with

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the crisis.

Nevertheless, the unrest has continued. Rumours about the killing of a 14-year-old girl during last week's clashes led to more protests in front of the municipal government building last Sunday. One witness told the *South China Morning Post*: "At least several hundred people flocked to Hongda Square near the city's Communist Party headquarters in the morning, in an apparent bid to hold a public mourning." The crowd later dispersed.

The authorities remained worried, ordering thousands of students at two high schools to stay on campus, where many live in dormitories, even though the end-of-term exams had finished. Students were warned that if they participated in any protests, no university in Chengdu, the provincial capital, would admit them.

Six demonstrators are still in detention, facing potential criminal charges ranging from attacking police cars to throwing bricks at officers.

The regime's fear of broader unrest among young people, and other on-line "netizens," was voiced in a *Global Times* editorial last week. "Among the protesters were many high school students, who have been hailed by a group of opinion leaders," it noted. "Netizens even cheered those young protesters for 'firing the first shot'." The editorial insisted that students "should be kept out of mass protests and espec ially political conflicts."

An article in yesterday's London-based *Financial Times* also focused on the role of students in the Shifang protests. It commented that the generation born in China since the 1990s was more politically active and engaged than previous generations, largely because of worsening job prospects and widening social inequality.

"China's post-90 generation, many of whom are only children due to the one-child policy, tend to be highly educated, with more attending university than ever before," the article observed. "However analysts say there is less social mobility in China today than there was during the 1980s or 1990s, when double-digit growth and a rapidly changing economy propelled a new group of businesspeople to the ranks of the über-rich.

"Today's students, they argue, see few of those opportunities in their future, and Chinese officials worry very publicly about whether the 7 million who graduated from college this year will be able to find work."

The truth is that the systemic collusion between the CCP bureaucracy and the new bourgeoisie that it has cultivated through its three decades of capitalist restoration, has blocked so-called social mobility and deepened the social divide.

Hongda typifies this process. The privately-owned conglomerate emerged as a workshop making fertilisers in 1979, taking advantage of the de-collectivisation of agriculture and shortages of fertilisers. It grew into a sizeable business by cooperating with major state-owned enterprises during the 1980s. By the 1990s, thanks to the CCP's wholesale privatisation program, Hongda had bought large government-owned chemical firms and mines. It has since become one of the 500 largest share market-listed corporations in China. In 2011, its owner, Liu Canglong, ranked as China's 32nd richest billionaire.

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