

# Thousands protest over migrant worker's death in Beijing

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In another sign of growing social tensions in China, thousands of people joined protests in Beijing last week over the death of a young female migrant worker at a shopping mall on May 2. Although heated demonstrations occur across the country on a daily basis, they are rare in the capital, where security is extremely tight.

According to reports on the *Jasmine Revolution Web Site*, the government responded to initial protests, involving hundreds of people last Wednesday, with a massive force of 3,000 paramilitary, anti-riot and special police officers, supported by armoured vehicles and helicopters. Eventually, thousands of onlookers joined in, giving voice to the pent-up anger over the plight of rural migrants working as cheap labour in the cities. (See photo of armed police blocking protestors in the streets)

The unrest was sparked by the death of 22-year-old Yuan Liya, who came from the impoverished Anhui province. She went to work at the clothing market on the evening of May 2, but her body was found at 5 am the next day, apparently fallen from the Jingwen shopping mall in Beijing's Fengtai district. Rumours spread that she had been sexually assaulted by security guards and died attempting to flee, or had been thrown from the building.

Police insisted that Yuan's death was simply a suicide, but refused to release video footage to her boyfriend and mother of her allegedly jumping to her death. Her body was quickly incinerated without her family's permission. This sparked comments on Weibo, which is similar to Twitter, as well as anger among other migrant workers from Anhui living in Beijing.

A shopkeeper told the *Guardian* that the police arrived around 10 am last Wednesday, followed by

around 200 people who paraded down the street shouting, "Protest! Protest!" The police then closed the road at the Jingwen shopping mall. Bystanders said the police beat protesters and dragged them into police vans. (See photo of them holding banners marching in the street)

The official *China Daily* reported that police had warned protesters there would be further arrests if they dared to return. "Police are now scanning surveillance footage of the protest and will detain those who severely disrupted social order," the newspaper announced.

In a bid to defuse the situation, Beijing Public Security Bureau spokesman Zi Xiangdong reported that Yuan had "jumped by herself" because there was no sign that she had been attacked. The police claimed that she had made no contact with any strangers before her death and her autopsy revealed no signs of any assault.

This claim, however, produced a national uproar in social media, with people concluding that there was a police cover up and speculating that the Jingwen shopping mall's owner might be a powerful figure. On Weibo, the Internet police quickly blocked the name of the bridge and district where the demonstrations occurred, but "Anhui girl" trended as a top search term.

Ever since the brutal crackdown on the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests that had led to millions of workers and students taking to the streets, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime has been highly sensitive to any protests in the capital. In recent years, there has been a debate within the ruling bureaucracy about relocating the capital to a small city, populated mainly by government officials, rather than leaving the state and party headquarters in the middle of a major working class centre of 20 million people. Of Beijing's residents, more than seven million are internal

migrants.

Migrant workers like Yuan are treated as second class citizens, without formal access to basic services such as education, and strictly speaking not even permitted to live in Beijing and other key cities. This has made them vulnerable to all kinds of abuses at the hands of employers and authorities. Female migrants are vulnerable to sexual assaults, and to being forced by poverty into prostitution.

The *Financial Times* commented that the incident had highlighted “mounting social pressures facing China’s leaders.” It reported: “The area where Ms Yuan worked is poor and is mostly populated by ‘outsiders’ such as herself who work in the garment trading industry, according to residents. Scepticism of the police is widespread in China and many smaller protests across the country have been sparked by allegations of malpractice.”

The CCP leadership is deeply concerned that any public protest could spark a broader oppositional movement among working people, who are facing skyrocketing costs of living, falling incomes and rising unemployment, caused by a faltering economy.

On May 6, in the latest indicator of industrial unrest, 3,000 workers at Japanese-owned Tawada Electronics in Dongguang city, Guangdong province—a plant making radios and digital recorders—went on strike to protest against low wages and poor overtime pay. On the same day, a thousand workers at Taiwanese-owned Delta Smooth in Shenzhen demonstrated against the plant’s closure, and demanded unpaid wages. Large numbers of police were deployed to prevent the protest from spreading. (See photo of Delta Smooth workers marching in the street)

Incoming President Xi Jinping restored the May Day public holiday this year, after it had been abolished a few years ago, in an attempt to placate working class discontent over social inequality. On the eve of May Day, Xi told a group of officials from the state-controlled All-China Federation of Trade Unions: “China’s working class should integrate their personal ideals and a happy family life into the prosperity of the country, which contributes to national rejuvenation. Personal dreams and the dream of China are closely linked together.”

In reality, Xi’s slogan of a “Chinese dream” invokes the fabulous personal wealth of the new propertied

class cultivated by the CCP’s policy of restoring capitalism over the past three decades. Children of former and current CCP leaders, known as the “princelings,” have exploited their political connections at the expense of the working people.

China’s *New Fortune* magazine recently reported that Kong Dongmei, Chairman Mao Zedong’s granddaughter, is now the 242nd richest individual in China, with a fortune of \$US815 million. Xi himself is part of the hated “red aristocracy.”

This super-rich layer is coming into conflict not only with workers but rural people. On May 8-9, thousands of villagers at Hudong township, in Guangdong province’s Shanwei city, stormed the local government building over the sale, without their agreement, of large farmlands to Baolihua New Energy Stock Co to build coal-fired power stations. (See Youtube video)

The company’s billionaire chairman is Ye Huaneng, the son of a senior CCP figure, Ye Jianying, who played a key role in helping Deng Xiaoping come to power in 1978 and initiate the pro-market policy.

The protests in Beijing, among the most oppressed layers of workers, are a further indication that the oligarchic elite led by the CCP is on a collision course with the working class and rural poor.



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