

Chinese mineworkers arrested after protest on unpaid wages

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Police at Shuangyashan in China's northeastern province of Heilongjiang have detained more than 30 mineworkers who led large protests in early March over unpaid wages. The police crackdown points to fears in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership of social unrest amid a slowing economy and plans for mass sackings in basic industries.

The protests had erupted during the National People's Congress after Heilongjiang provincial governor Lu Hao told a press conference that all the workers employed by the large state-owned Longmay Mining Group had been paid in full. Banners at the protests read: "We want to live, we want to eat." According to Reuters, the protests were called off after a day when the company offered to pay two months' wages.

The protests were deeply embarrassing for Lu, a member of the CCP Central Committee and touted as a potential Politburo member. He was compelled to admit that he had been wrong and promised to ensure workers would be paid in full. Lu blamed the company for withholding information and promised to "severely punish" anyone who did so again.

As the arrests make clear, Lu's main aim is to ensure that there are no more protests. A worker named Chen told Agence France Presse that miners were still owed more than 60 percent of their wages from 2014 and 2015. He declined to give his full name because of fear of reprisals. "The miners don't dare protest anymore," he said.

The government has plans for mass layoffs in the coal industry. The China National Coal Association has estimated that 5,600 coal mines, more than half of all mines in China, will close in the next five years. About 1,000 mines will close this year. At the start of March, employment minister Yin Weimin said 1.3 million jobs

would be axed in the coal industry.

The government has announced a 100 billion yuan (\$US15.5 billion) fund to retrain and relocate sacked coal and steel workers. But Reuters reported last week that the projected costs for laying off 1.3 million coal miners alone are as much as 195 billion yuan.

The situation facing workers in the "rust belt" northeastern provinces, with a large number of older coal mines, is particularly dire. Longmay, the largest state-owned enterprise in Heilongjiang, announced last year it would sack 100,000 workers out of a workforce of 248,000. One worker from Hegang, also in Heilongjiang, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* in January: "There are no prospects here... All I want is for my son to go out when he's older. There isn't much hope in this place."

Lu Hao has been tipped as a rising political star. He is the youngest provincial governor and was the youngest full member of the CCP Central Committee when appointed. Born in 1967, he was leader of the Chinese Youth League, a post also held by current Premier Li Keqiang and former President Hu Jintao. Lu was appointed at the age of 28 as the manager of a debt-ridden wool company, becoming the youngest director of a state-owned factory.

Lu's "success" at restructuring the wool factory brought him to the attention of the CCP leadership. But one former worker told the *South China Morning Post*: "Lu didn't manage the factory well. The factory wasn't profitable but it became a showcase for higher leaders, so it only looked good on the surface." Lu was profiled last November in the *Economist*, which noted his "work ethic" and "solid record," as well as his promotion by the *People's Daily* and other major state-owned papers.

Lu was installed as governor of Heilongjiang in 2013,

no doubt to manage the mass layoffs that were looming and to deal with the resulting social and economic dislocation. Clearly his public embarrassment at China's most significant annual political gathering by protesting workers could not go unanswered.

The arrests in Heilongjiang are not an isolated incident. Also in March, eight construction workers in Sichuan Province were detained and publicly shamed over a protest they organised of hundreds of workers last August to demand unpaid wages. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the eight workers were charged with "obstructing official business," found guilty and sentenced to jail terms of six to eight months.

The authorities sought to make an example of the workers for the "crime" of demanding their wages. The Langzhong Municipal Court organised a public rally where the eight were paraded on a platform in order "to educate the public on how to lawfully protect their rights." Their cases were read aloud as the workers stood flanked by two police.

This spectacle provoked a popular backlash on social media. One comment declared: "Don't take the public for fools. You think the people don't understand your purpose in using public sentencing? Let me tell you this: public sentiment is not to be bullied!" The court subsequently removed the notice from the web site and said it was conducting an investigation.

These incidents are part of a growing wave of strikes and protests across China. According to the Hong Kong-based China Labour Bulletin, of the 2,913 protests and strikes in the past 12 months, arrests took place in 170 cases. Of these, 95 arrests were in the past six months. Eighty-one percent of the protests and strikes have been about wage arrears.

Data from the bulletin's web site, which relies on social media reports, shows that since the start of this year there have been almost 800 protests and strikes. In March alone, five incidents involved more than 1,000 workers, including the protests in Shuangyashan.

At the end of the National People's Congress, Premier Li Keqiang claimed that structural economic reform and the elimination of huge excess capacities in basic industries would proceed without mass layoffs. The notion that millions of steel workers and coal miners are going to be absorbed in service industries, even as the economy continues to slow, is absurd. The recent arrests are a warning of the methods that the

CCP will use to deal with resistance by workers to the job destruction being prepared on a mass scale.



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