

Chinese soldiers protest over benefits in central Beijing

Our reporter
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More than 1,000 mostly retired Chinese soldiers protested outside the Defence Ministry headquarters in central Beijing throughout Tuesday over the government's failure to assure key veteran benefits, including pensions, healthcare and jobs.

Clad in camouflage uniforms, the protesters sang "In Unity is Our Strength" and other People's Liberation Army (PLA) songs. One banner read: "Our rights and benefits to be transferred from military posts to suitable civilian work have been violated."

The protest was surrounded by hundreds of police, who blocked nearby streets and attempted to prevent the media from taking photos or interviewing the participants. Demonstrations, particularly those in central Beijing, are usually quickly shut down by authorities. The apparently lenient attitude toward Tuesday's protest indicates great nervousness in the Chinese regime over the potential for unrest within the PLA.

As part of a far-reaching restructuring of the Chinese military announced last year, the PLA plans to slash 300,000 troops from its total of 2.3 million. The latest cutback will add to the pool of at least six million retired PLA veterans, whose ranks have staged a series of protests in recent years over similar demands.

Hundreds of thousands of soldiers are being retrenched as the Chinese economy is sharply slowing and the government has announced plans to slash over-capacity in state-owned enterprises.

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang attempted to assuage anger among PLA veterans at the National People's Congress in March by pledging to spend 39.8 billion yuan (\$US6.1 billion) on allowances for retrenched troops. "We will see that demobilised military personnel are settled into new jobs or have good access to employment and business startup services," he said.

The government claimed to have ordered state-owned enterprises (SOE) to reserve 5 percent of new jobs for veterans. At the same gathering, however, plans were unveiled for massive lay-offs in SOEs in key sectors, including 1.3 million coal miners and 500,000 steelworkers.

Veterans gathered at Tuesday's protest clearly did not believe the promises. An unnamed 55-year-old protester from Shanxi province told the *Wall Street Journal* that veterans had received nothing since retiring—no pensions, no social security. "We've been neglected," he said. "We're here to seek what we deserve."

Shanxi is one of China's northern rustbelt provinces where growth rates have slumped and unemployment is high. The ex-soldier said he had been forced to work odd jobs to make ends meet since leaving the PLA two decades ago.

According to a report by the US government's Radio Free Asia (RFA), the protesters came to Beijing from around a dozen Chinese cities and provinces.

A PLA veteran, who only gave his surname, Gao, told RFA: "I signed up to the army in 1976 in Beijing and was demobilised in 1988. It wasn't too bad to start with, but then they started laying off people in the factories and we were just given 400 yuan and told to leave. That was never going to be enough. We've been unfairly treated."

Another protester surnamed Hu pointed to the broad spectrum of soldiers involved. "Today we have here demobilised soldiers, including lower-ranking officers, non-commissioned officers, and regular soldiers [as well as] soldiers who participated in nuclear tests and the Vietnam War," he said.

A human rights activist, Huang Qi, told the *Guardian* that veterans had held more than 50 protests this year.

However, the latest one—outside the Defence Ministry headquarters—was obviously aimed at embarrassing the government, which was hosting a high-level international security gathering, the Xiangshan Forum. Defence Minister Chang Wanquan was to host a banquet for participants in the building.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, one of the largest previous protests of demobilised PLA soldiers took place in June 2015, when several thousand, mainly veterans of the 1979 war between China and Vietnam, gathered outside the Central Military Commission (CMC) in Beijing. The CMC commands the Chinese armed forces and is headed by President Xi Jinping.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime is clearly concerned that such protests could trigger wider unrest within the military, and more broadly across society. Under Xi's leadership, the military apparatus is being overhauled to focus greater emphasis on the navy, air force and missile units, and away from the army.

The PLA restructuring will end the existing command structures that divide the country into seven “military regions,” which have functioned as quasi-fiefdoms for the army, supplemented by four “general departments.” The role of the CMC will be greatly expanded, giving the CCP and Xi in particular greater control of the military.

The veterans' protests are just an overt symptom of broader dissatisfaction, not only within the lower PLA ranks but also among generals who are being sidelined. Last November, the military's main newspaper, the *PLA Daily*, posted an article, subsequently deleted, bluntly warning that if the restructuring is “not done properly, this could affect the stability of the military or even all of society.”

The PLA has been the central instrument of the CCP's police state-apparatus, which has been used to suppress opposition, particularly by the working class. In June 1989, the regime used the army, backed by tanks, to crush the mass protests in Tiananmen Square and other cities at the point where large sections of workers were joining the students, raising their own class demands. The CCP recalls only too well that army units had to be drawn from the countryside after those present in Beijing balked at killing civilians.

The Xi leadership is conscious that it will have to rely on PLA to suppress the growing social unrest being

fuelled by the slowing economy, the lack of jobs and services and the widening gulf between the super-rich that the CCP represents and the working class. One measure of popular discontent is the strike figures collated by the Hong Kong-based *China Labour Bulletin*. Last year, strikes doubled from the previous year to nearly 2,800, and as of July were up by another 20 percent this year.



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