Mass eviction of rural migrant workers from Chinese capital

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Tens of thousands of Chinese rural migrant workers are being forcibly evicted by authorities in Beijing as part of the local government's campaign against so-called over-population. With some given as little as 15 minutes warning, the most exploited workers in China are being expelled from the city in droves with their homes demolished behind them.

To forestall resistance, water and electricity have been cut off from entire migrant neighbourhoods. The timing of the evictions is particularly callous; the onset of winter has seen recorded night-time temperatures plummet below freezing point.

Wang Yongxian, a top official of Beijing's Fengtai district, urged police to "act hard, mercilessly, and quickly." Footage has been leaked online of police breaking down doors for those failing to comply, and arresting them for risking public safety.

The heavy-handed moves come in the wake of a chemical fire that broke out in a two-storey apartment building in Beijing's southern Daxing district on November 18. Thirty-four fire engines with 14 fire-fighting teams took three hours to extinguish the fire.

The blaze claimed the lives of 19 people including 8 children, 17 of whom were migrants. Eight others were also injured. According to Xinhua News, the fire had been started by faulty refrigeration in the basement of the building, with the only emergency exit blocked by flammable materials. Eighteen suspects had been detained.

House fires are common in the slum districts of Beijing. For Daxing district, this was the third serious fire this year. Many buildings in migrant areas in China are of poor construction and difficult for fire engines to access.

Beijing rents are skyrocketing with the average rental prices hovering around 1.2 times the average income—one of the least affordable renting markets in the world. This forces migrants into cramped, unsafe conditions that amount to death-traps. The apartment building in Daxing housed 400 workers.

It is not uncommon for living quarters to be placed adjacent to their respective factories and restaurants, which entail further safety hazards.

Authorities are seizing upon the fire as a matter of public safety to rid the city of "illegal structures and businesses" through "fraction dispersal measures" over an area of 40 million square miles.

Communist Party Chief of Beijing, Cai Qi announced: "The lessons of the fire are extremely grave…the city must be on high alert. We must take actions and protect people's lives and safeguard the safety and stability of the capital."

The government's understated aim is to advance long-established plans for "urban rectification" to "beautify" areas of the capital and reduce its population.

In 2016, government publications revealed an economic and social development plan to cap its population at 23 million by 2020 and reduce the number of its "low-end" population—the bureaucratic term for its migrant population of 8 million. Downtown districts in 2018 were to be reduced by 15 percent compared to 2014, which equates to a relocation of roughly 1.9 million people.

"We are emptying the cages to change the birds," Tan Xuxiang, director of Beijing Municipal Commission of Development and Reform, told the *People's Daily* in July. He detailed a strategy of phasing out underperforming markets and services to stimulate growth in favour of industries such as technology and finance. Eleven square miles have already been demolished in the first half of this year.

Authorities have found it difficult to convince

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migrant workers to move elsewhere since it unveiled its plans. The sheer lack of employment opportunities in the countryside, not to mention the absence of available housing and services such as health and education, mean the bulk of migrants prefer to stay.

According to a recent study by the Health and Human Rights Journal, rural-urban workers (another term for Chinese migrants) reportedly struggle with high levels of mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, hostility, social isolation and insomnia. Suicide rates are three times the national average, according to the World Health Organization.

There are reportedly over 282 million migrant workers in China, a third of the labour force, who constitute an industrial reserve army to suppress wages and conditions. With the slowing of the Chinese economy, these workers are now deemed disposable by the regime and a hindrance to Beijing's further development as a financial hub.

The city of Beijing has swollen from 10.1 million people in 2000 to 21.7 million in 2016. A key role in its expansion has been the super-exploitation of cheap labour in services and the construction industry, particularly for the infrastructure for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

In the lead-up to the Olympics, some 90 percent of the construction industry was composed of migrant workers from the countryside, who were denied proper wages, access to medical and social services, and insurance for dangerous conditions.

Many migrant construction workers reportedly felt like "cattle" or "slaves" because of the strenuous conditions and long hours. Some were roused in the middle of the night to work. One government survey revealed that on average they were working 10 hours a day, 27 days a month. Six deaths were reported during in the Olympic Games construction.

In China, the hukou system, a form of household registration used since the 1950s, is used to block access by migrant workers to essential social services in the cities such as housing, healthcare and education. Many involved in the Olympic construction were unable to file complaints against their employers simply because they originated from rural areas.

Prior to the start of the Olympics, when the completion of all construction was assured, over a million workers were evicted to present a "clean and harmonious" image of the city. One irate worker, Li Ming, recently spoke to an SBS news reporter, "In 2008 you welcomed us at the railway station and treated us like gods, in order to construct the city. Now how do you treat us?"

With the move to gentrify Beijing, many services, such as retail and logistics, that rely on cheap labour will be impacted. Evicted workers will face longer commutes than before, should they manage to rebuild their lives. It is an indictment of the Chinese capitalist system, hell-bent on profit, and an embittering process that will lead workers into mass struggles.

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