

Signs of rising levels of workers' struggles in China

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Amid a slowing Chinese economy and the US imposition of trade war measures on Chinese goods, there are signs of growing working-class unrest with strikes and protests over unpaid wages, factory closures and oppressive working conditions.

The Beijing regime, which is deeply fearful of opposition by workers, maintains heavy press censorship of any struggles. Estimates of so-called “mass incidents,” which include rural protests and environmental demonstrations, are limited.

The Hong-Kong based China Labour Bulletin (CLB) keeps a record of protests and strikes by Chinese workers derived from the press reports and its own contacts within China. Last year CLB recorded more than 1,700 incidents, up by 36 percent from 1,250 in 2017.

These figures are only indicative. The CLB estimates that its records account for only between 5 to 10 percent of the actual number of industrial actions by workers—in other words, the number of strikes and protests is 10 to 20 times greater than the CLB figures.

The *South China Morning Post* last year cited the comments of the spokesman for the state-run All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), Wang Xiaofeng, who declared in October that its arbitration panels had dealt with about 2 million general labour disputes over the previous five years—or an average of around 400,000 a year. The ACFTU functions as an industrial police force to suppress strikes and is widely despised by workers.

In its report on the state of labour relations in China in 2018, the CLB noted that the vast majority of collective labour disputes, or 73.3 percent, occurred at domestically-owned private enterprises, 11.6 percent in state-owned enterprises and just 2.9 percent in Hong Kong/Macau/Taiwan foreign-funded enterprises and

joint ventures. Most were relatively small and lasted for only a few days.

CLB figures for strikes in manufacturing as a proportion of the total have declined from 41 percent in 2014 to 16 percent last year. The largest proportion was in the construction industry, which accounted for 45 percent of the total in 2018 with the overwhelming majority concerned with the late- or non-payment of wages.

An Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) report last week on increasing strike levels cited the case of a group of construction workers in southern Dongguan City who on Christmas Eve threatened to jump off the roof of the tall building they had constructed to demand nearly \$20,000 in unpaid wages.

Their former employer disappeared without paying the wages owed. One of the workers posted an appeal on the Chinese social media platform Weibo declaring that they had exhausted every avenue to track him down. “It [hasn’t worked] at all after more than two weeks of efforts... Please give us migrant workers a way to survive.”

The *New York Times* earlier this month cited a worker, Zong Liang, who had taken part in a protest in January outside an electronics factory in Shenzhen over unpaid wages. “Nobody cares about us anymore,” he said. “I sacrificed my health for the company and now I can’t afford to buy even a bag of rice.”

The CLB estimates that non-payment of wages is a component of 80 percent of all strikes and protests. Non-payment of social insurance contributions and redundancy pay-outs, arbitrary pay reductions and the imposition of onerous working conditions are among the other issues provoking industrial action.

Strikes in the transport sector by truck and van drivers, taxi and ride-hailing drivers, couriers and food

delivery workers were another major component of the overall strike figures. The CLB noted that one of the largest, coordinated strikes occurred in June last year when tens of thousands of truck drivers across the country refused to work in protest over low haulage rates, high fuel costs and arbitrary fines.

The *New York Times* article also pointed out that labour activists had in some cases used social media to organise wider protests across provincial lines. Last year tens of thousands of crane operators were involved in a one-day strike in at least 10 of China's provinces.

Last October Chinese President Xi Jinping and six other top officials met with leaders of the official All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) to urge them to be more pro-active in suppressing discontent and opposition. Xi declared that the union should “focus on the most pressing, most immediate issues that concern employees, and fulfil the obligation of safeguarding workers’ rights and interests” so as to “consolidate the class foundation and public support for the party’s governance.”

Xi’s remarks are cynical window-dressing. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does not represent the working class but defends the interests of the capitalist class, especially the super-wealthy oligarchs who grown rich through the gross exploitation of workers and the plunder of state-owned property through processes of capitalist restoration over the past three decades.

The CCP’s response to rising levels of strikes and protests is to crack down on workers using police state measures. The *New York Times* reported: “The authorities have detained more than 150 people since August, a sharp increase from previous years, including teachers, taxi drivers, construction workers, and leftist students leading a campaign against factory abuses.”

What terrifies the CCP apparatus, however, is the prospect of a political movement of the working class that links separate struggles under an anti-capitalist banner directed against the regime in Beijing. It has cracked down with particular ferocity against students from elite universities who participated last year in the fight by workers at the Jasic Technology plant for an independent union and improved wages and conditions.

A lengthy article in the *Financial Times* last week featuring interviews with some of the students who pointed to the growth of social inequality as the

principal reason for their radicalisation and turn to workers. The Gini coefficient, which is designed to measure social polarization, has increased sharply over the past three decades—from 0.30 in 1980 to 0.47 in 2017. A coefficient of 0 represents absolute equality, while a value of 1 represents absolute inequality.

This year marks three significant anniversaries—100 years since the May 4 movement, an outburst of anti-imperialist protests begun by university students; the 70th anniversary of the 1949 Chinese Revolution in October; and the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests begun by students but which led to a widespread uprising by workers. The CCP regime is undoubtedly concerned that any or all of these dates could become the focus of mass political opposition.



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