Chinese authorities arrest editors involved with workers' protests

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Chinese authorities intensified their crackdown on labour activists and leftist students last month, arresting journalists sympathetic to the plight of workers and critical of the government. This followed the detention of students and workers, 44 of whom are still in custody, for their involvement in a struggle by Jasic Technology workers last year to form an independent trade union.

On March 20, Wei Zhili and Ke Chengbing were taken into custody. They are editors of *New Generation*, which reported on the conditions of the millions of internal migrant workers in China. Wei's laptop and mobile phone were confiscated. Yang Zhengjun, the publication's editor-in-chief, had been detained already on January 8.

Amnesty International reported that a police officer had told Wei's father, who was present when the arrest was made, that his son would be sent to a detention centre for re-education. The officer accused Wei of "not having a proper job although graduating from a good school, and being 'brainwashed' to engage in anti-communist and counter-revolutionary activities that disturb the social order."

Wei's wife, Zheng Churan, an activist for women's rights, told the *Financial Times*: "My husband just wants to help workers, he hasn't done anything wrong but still he has been detained and lost his freedom, it's devastating." She said she was worried the police would use "abusive methods to force him to admit that he did something wrong."

A Guangdong-based activist told *Newsgram.com* that the *New Generation* editors were likely detained for assisting migrant workers suffering pneumoconiosis, or black lung disease, who were seeking compensation. "Seven hundred pneumoconiosis sufferers from Hunan launched a complaint last November in Shenzhen," the activist said.

"Their treatment hadn't worked, and they had spent a lot of money on it. If each person was awarded 100,000 yuan ($US14,840) that would be 30 million yuan in total, so that's why the Shenzhen authorities detained [the editors] in a hurry."

Steven Butler, Asia program coordinator for the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said in a statement: "The arrest of Wei Zhili is just the latest example of how frightened China's leadership is of journalists who expose the truth about labor conditions in China. Wei and his colleagues should be released and hailed as heroes who expose the truth about labor conditions in China."

Authorities confirmed on March 26 that Wei was being held in detention at Guangzhou, the provincial capital. He has no access to legal support.

The China Labour Bulletin (CLB) reported that on March 27 the police barred a group of nearly 100 workers at the Sangzhi railway station who tried to travel to Shenzhen to stage a protest to express their solidarity with Wei.

Gu Fuxiang, 52, a father of two, who was diagnosed with pneumoconiosis in 2009, told CLB: "In 2017, I was stage 2 patient. Earlier this year I was found to have reached stage 3… I only have one lifetime, and even if I fear reprisals, I just simply cannot stop fighting for a fair deal."

The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) organised a small protest outside Beijing's liaison office on March 26 and marched through the city to demand the release of all Jasic workers and detained labour activists. On the same day, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) picketed the Chinese embassy in Seoul to oppose the detentions.

On March 28, the Philippine trade union organization

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SENTRO demonstrated outside the Chinese embassy in Manila. SENTRO general secretary Josua Mata condemned "the steadily widening repression of Chinese workers" and demanded their immediate release.

In a separate arrest on March 21, Chai Xiaoming, a former editor of *Red Reference* and a former Peking University lecturer, was detained for "subversion of the state" and held under "residential surveillance at a designated location."

According to Radio Free Asia, the reason for the arrest appears to be the publication of a recent lecture by Jin Canrong, a former lecturer in international relations at Renmin University, suggesting that China could take "a different path to modernisation"—a veiled criticism of the Chinese government.

Red Reference was forced to shut down last year, after police raided its office and the office of another labour news outlet, *Epoch Pioneer*. The raid was carried out simultaneously with the crack down on Jasic Solidarity Group supporters on August 24. These web sites had given media coverage of the Jasic struggle. Their documents and computers were confiscated. Seven editors of *Epoch Pioneer* and Shang Kai of *Red Reference* were arrested and detained in an unknown location. Later Shang was granted bail under condition that he not appear in public.

According to the CPJ, at least 47 journalists were in detention in China at the end of 2018. The Paris-based Reporters without Borders (RSF) stated that the figure was at least 60. The actual number could be far higher.

Amid a slowing economy and growing signs of working-class unrest, the Chinese regime is using its police-state apparatus to clamp down on any opposition. It fears that the isolated strikes and protests over wages, conditions and jobs could transform into a broader political movement against the government. As a result, its crackdown is directed particularly at left-leaning students and journalists.

At the same time, under conditions of heavy state censorship, the sources of information about the arrests are limited. The above reports are from publications and organisations that in one way or another follow the line from Washington and must be treated with caution. In the case of Radio Free Asia, it is a propaganda arm of the US State Department.

Washington has no interest in defending the rights of journalists in China, other than to provide further fuel for anti-China propaganda as it intensifies its confrontation with Beijing and prepares for war. The Trump administration is currently seeking the extradition of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, to face imprisonment and potentially the death penalty for exposing the crimes of American imperialism.

Chinese workers, students and journalists should certainly be released. However, organisations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, which describes the Chinese editors as "heroes" and calls for them to be immediately freed, do not apply the same standard to Assange. On Assange's arrest, CPJ issued a mealy-mouthed statement declaring it was "deeply concerned," but did not call for his immediate release and certainly did not hail him as a hero.

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