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China: The human cost of the economic 'miracle'

The millions of migrant labourers who are fuelling China's economic growth are treated as an urban underclass, according to a new report by Amnesty International. Despite recent reforms, they are shut out of the health care system and state education, live in appalling, overcrowded conditions and are routinely exposed to some of the most exploitative working conditions.

"China's so-called economic 'miracle' comes at a terrible human cost -- rural migrants living in the cities experience some of the worst abuse in the work place," said Catherine Baber, Deputy Asia Pacific Director at Amnesty International. "They are forced to work long stretches of overtime, often denied time off even when sick, and labour under hazardous conditions for paltry wages."

"As well as being exploited by employers, migrant families face discriminatory government regulations in almost every area of daily life. They are denied housing benefits and health insurance available to permanent urban residents and their children are often effectively shut out of the state education system."

There are estimated to be between 150-200 million rural workers who have moved to China's cities in search of work and the number is set to grow in the coming decade. In some cities they make up the majority of the population.

Internal migrants are required to register as a temporary residents with local authorities under the *hukou* (household registration) system. Those who manage to complete the often laborious process still face discrimination in housing, education, health care and employment on the basis of their temporary status. The many who are unable to complete the process are left with no legal status, making them vulnerable to exploitation by police, landlords, employers and local residents.

"The central government has taken some steps to improve the plight of migrant workers, but the biggest issue remains entrenched -- the *hukou* system continues to discriminate against people on the basis of their social origin," said Catherine Baber. "The government must reform the *hukou* system and also push local authorities to implement existing laws that are meant to ensure health care, fairer conditions of employment and free primary education."

Managers use a variety of tactics to prevent workers resigning. Internal migrants are typically owed back pay, meaning those who quit their job lose at least 2-3 months wages. Employers often purposefully withhold wages before the lunar new year to ensure workers come back to their jobs after the festive

period -- meaning millions of migrants are unable to buy train tickets home for the holidays. Managers often illegally force workers to pay a deposit to prevent them switching jobs. Because of their insecure status under the *hukou* system, internal migrants are not likely to complain.

Such tactics allow managers to deal with the growing labour shortage without having to raise wages. This helps explain why wages have not risen significantly in response to labour shortages, as one would expect under normal market conditions.

One migrant, 21-year old Ms Zhang, worked in a clothing factory on the outskirts of Beijing. The workers had not been paid for 3 months and they decided to cut their losses and leave. But they were locked into the factory and needed permission slips to leave. Finally one of them stole the key to the gate and they left en masse so the guard couldn't hold them back. Ms Zhang recounted: "*At the time, we were really pleased with ourselves... In fact, there were those in our group who had lost four months of wages.*"

Millions of children of internal migrants are also affected and struggle to get a decent education. In many areas they are effectively shut out of state schools by their parents' lack of local *hukou* registration, by charges levied exclusively on migrants or by high school fees.

"China has committed to providing free primary education, but despite the efforts of the central government, state schools still charge fees that make primary education unaffordable, particularly to internal migrants," said Catherine Baber. "These millions of children are China's future: the government must allow them an education."

The report, *CHINA Internal migrants: discrimination and abuse -- The human cost of an economic "miracle"*, will be available from 1 March 00:01 GMT at:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa170082007>.

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