

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ASA 17/022/2002 (Public)
News Service No: 69
30 April 2002

Embargo Date: 30 April 2002 17:00 GMT

China: "Workers want to eat - workers want a job"

Growing labour unrest in China is being met with repression, including imprisonment and torture, and a denial of basic human rights such as freedom of association and expression, Amnesty International said today in a new report released on the eve of May Day.

"Protests by angry workers over layoffs, wage arrears, poor working conditions, and management corruption have been met with repression and force. Clashes between workers and armed police have resulted in casualties and arrests. Such demonstrations are often unreported as the local authorities attempt to conceal the severity or extent of the protests," the organization said.

Many labour activists and supporters have been detained and beaten during or immediately after demonstrations, then released after a short period of detention. Others, usually the organizers, have been formally charged and imprisoned for long periods of time. Journalists and lawyers are also targeted by the authorities and face intimidation and arrest if they speak out in defence of the workers.

Cao Maobing, a labour activist in a silk factory in Funing, Jiangsu province, said that he spent seven months in Yancheng No.4 Psychiatric Hospital in 2001 and was forcibly given drugs and electric shock treatment after he led a strike and tried to form a union to fight against corrupt factory bosses.

Since the late 1980s there have been several attempts to create independent trade unions to give an independent voice to the workers. However all of these have been quickly repressed, and their leaders imprisoned.

Interaction between foreign trade unions and the official trade union body -- the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) -- is increasing, however the issue of independent trade unions and the detention of labour activists is rarely discussed

openly.

Amnesty International also today published a list of cases of people imprisoned including those who have attempted to defend labour rights, some of whom have been imprisoned since 1989, some of whom have been tortured and are in ill-health. Amnesty International members are urging unions to raise these individual cases and the human rights of workers generally in any contact with the Chinese government and its union.

Amnesty International is calling on the Chinese authorities to allow workers in China full and free exercise of their rights to freedom of association and expression, including the right to form independent trade unions and to hold peaceful protests, without fear of detention or torture.

Background

In the shift from a state run economy to a market-led economy, large state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have been shut down resulting in layoffs of millions of workers. Unemployed workers are often promised redundancy money and pensions which never appear. There have been many cases of corrupt officials taking these funds.

For those that do work, conditions are often very harsh -- overtime is frequently compulsory, workers may be forbidden to get married, workers may not be allowed move in and out of the factory compound even after work hours, they may be forbidden to talk during work hours and they be fined for going to the toilet too often. If workers complain about conditions they are often dismissed or their complaint ignored.

Workers are often exposed to dangerous chemicals or explosive materials without the necessary safeguards. As a result industrial accidents are common.

Independent trade unions are not permitted in China. The ACFTU is the national body which governs trade union activity. In October 2001 the Trade Union Law of the People's Republic of China was revised. Despite some improvements, the revised law still severely restrict workers' rights to freedom of association and expression, and some revisions represent a step backwards for workers rights.

On 28 February 2001, the Chinese government ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) - a major step towards recognising its obligations to guarantee these rights for the Chinese people. However, the government placed a reservation on its obligations towards Article 8 of the Covenant, which guarantees trade union rights, in particular Article 8.1a which concerns the right to freedom of association.

**Slogan reportedly shouted by workers during March 2002 demonstrations in Liaoyang city.*

For a copy of the report and list of cases please contact dmuller@amnesty.org

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

web: <http://www.amnesty.org>