Rescuers after a mine blast that killed thirty-two miners in Inner Mongolia on 3 December. PC: XINHUA
Xi Stresses Party Leadership over State-Owned Enterprises

On 11 October at a high-level national meeting Xi Jinping reaffirmed the centrality of Party leadership over China’s state-owned enterprises (SOEs). According to the official Xinhua News Agency, Xi emphasised that under a stronger leadership from the Party—‘the root and soul’ of SOEs in his words—SOEs should serve to implement the decisions of the Party, to promote national projects such as One Belt One Road, and to strengthen China’s economic and social development and national power. Xi urged further reform of the management and supervision of SOEs in order to improve corporate profitability and competitiveness, and to increase the value of state assets. Xinhua reported that in 2016 central SOEs underwent merging and consolidation, and announced that next year the reforms will focus on cutting inefficiency and overcapacity of local SOEs. SOEs retain a dominant role in the Chinese economy: in the first half of 2016, the gross revenues of central and local SOEs (excluding financial companies) reached 21.39 trillion yuan, or more than sixty percent of the national gross domestic product. In the same speech, Xi pointed to state workers’ rights to ‘know, participate, express and supervise within the SOEs’, and referred to the role of workers’ congresses in the democratic management of the companies and in the resolution of labour disputes. This is likely in response to the state workers’ protests early this year against the government’s cutting of overcapacity in the steel and coal industries (see the chapter by Kevin Lin on pp. 20–23 in the present book).

(Touch sources: South China Morning Post, Xinhua 1, Xinhua 2)

Tougher Rules for Ride-Hailing Businesses in China

In October, some of China’s largest cities—including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Chongqing, Tianjin, and Hangzhou—rolled out new regulations on internet-based ride-hailing businesses. China has thus become the first country in the world to create a formal legal framework for the sector. The regulations limit the pool of drivers and vehicles, citing concerns about traffic and safety. However, the criteria are discriminatory toward migrants in that they require drivers to have a local household registration or at least to be long-term, tax-paying residents of the city with a temporary residence permit of no less than six months. In recent years, Internet-based ride-hailing businesses have flourished, attracting migrants to work as drivers: in Beijing, more than eighty percent of the ride-hailing drivers are migrants from outside the city. The ride-hailing businesses have also led to protests by taxi drivers who see their businesses squeezed by unlicensed taxi and ride-hailing cars. But ride-hailing car drivers in China have held their own protests: for instance, in March, hundreds of Uber drivers in Hangzhou blocked roads and protested against entrapment by police. Uber China reportedly told its drivers not to clash with police.

(Sources: Bloomberg, Caixin 1, Caixin 2, Caixin 3, The Financial Times)
**Meng Han Sentenced**

On 3 November, Meng Han, the last of the labour activists detained in the crackdown of December 2015, was found guilty and sentenced to twenty-one months in jail by the Panyu district court in Guangzhou. While detained, Meng Han was denied access to his lawyer, and his parents were repeatedly harassed in their apartment by unidentified men. After the announcement of the sentence, friends and fellow activists held a fundraising initiative to collect money to support Meng Han’s living expenses while in jail, and about thirty unionists and labour rights groups in Hong Kong organised a protest outside the Hong Kong China Liaison Office demanding his immediate release. Days before the trial, the International Labour Organisation’s Committee on Freedom of Association released its interim report in response to a complaint launched by the International Trade Union Confederation. In it, the Chinese government was criticised for its treatment of labour activists, who ‘appear to have been arrested, detained and charged for being involved in a labour dispute and considers that the detentions of persons connected with their activities in defense of the interest of workers constitutes a serious interference with civil liberties in general and with trade union rights in particular.’ Labour NGOs all over the country are under increasing pressure. In Beijing, the Migrant Workers’ Home, a historic labour NGO that focuses on cultural activities for migrants, is facing eviction after more than ten years. The enforcement of China’s Foreign NGO Management Law in January 2017 will make it increasingly hard for NGOs to gain access to vital financial support from abroad (see the Compendium of the Law on pp. 60–67 in the present book).

(Sources: China Labour Bulletin, Jiliuwang, South China Morning Post, The Initium)

**Mine Blasts Kill Dozens**

On 27 September, a gas explosion in a coal mine in Ningxia took the lives of twenty miners. Similar explosions killed thirty-three miners in the municipality of Chongqing on 31 October, twenty-one miners in Heilongjiang province on 29 November, and thirty-two miners in Inner Mongolia on 3 December. More recently, on 5 December a gas explosion resulted in the deaths of eleven miners in Hubei province. Being the world’s top producer and consumer of coal, China has a tragic history of mine explosions. In recent years, authorities have been swift to crack down on unsafe mining operations. Commenting on the blast in Chongqing municipality, the State Administration of Coal Mine Safety said that despite the fact that the mine operation was fully licensed, it was still unsafe and illegal. In particular, the mine was too deep and the underground facilities did not have adequate ventilation. The State Administration has ordered all Chongqing mines to halt operations and conduct immediate safety inspections. China’s national safety regulator has also warned coal mines not to operate beyond their daily capacities, as rising prices tempt mine owners to increase production. In several cases, safety officials have been fired and mine operators arrested.

(Sources: Sixth Tone, South China Morning Post, Xinhua)
Parents of Left-Behind Children Face Prosecution

According to an official survey on the migrant population in China in 2016 released in mid-October by the National Health and Family Planning Commission, around sixty-one million children—more than a third of whom are younger than seventeen—currently live in the Chinese countryside without the daily care of their parents, who have migrated to other areas for work. These ‘left behind children’ are a serious social problem in China (see also the brief at p. 12 of this book). Earlier this year, Zhang Dandan a professor at Peking University, released the result of a survey of one thousand two hundred criminals in prison: about seventeen per cent of them had been ‘left behind children’. Tragedies are common. Earlier this year, three children, who had been left in the care of their grandmother by their migrant parents, drowned in a pond near their home village outside of Nanchang, Jiangxi province. There have also been some instances of suicide. In January 2014, a nine-year-old child hanged himself in the house of his grandparents in Huayang, Anhui province, after learning from his grandmother that his mother, a migrant worker, was not going to come home for the holidays. In June 2015, in a village in Bijie, Guizhou province, a thirteen-year-old boy and his three younger sisters killed themselves after having been left alone for months by their migrant parents. To prevent such tragedies, in February 2016, the State Council ordered local governments to establish a database of these children and issued guidelines to improve the physical and psychological health of such children. In November 2016, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, along with the police, the judicial departments, and the Ministry of Education announced a clampdown on parents who leave their children behind. Parents who fail to provide their children with proper parental care for six months or longer can now lose their custodial rights at the request of their relatives, village officials, or civil-affairs authorities.

(Sources: Caixin, CCTV, State Council, Zhongguo Qingnianbao, National Health and Family Planning Commission, South China Morning Post, The Paper)

Strikes at Multinational Companies in China

The last quarter of 2016 witnessed a series of strikes among the employees of several multinational companies in China over ownership changes. First, on 8 November, dozens of employees went on strike at a bottling plant owned by Danone in Guangzhou that had just been sold to a local company after learning that the French multinational was refusing to offer severance pay according to the workers’ years of employment on the pretext of the unchanged corporate name. After two weeks of strike, the company agreed to meet with the workers, but on that occasion the riot police entered the factory grounds and attacked the workers, with the result that several were injured. On 10 November, workers at a smartphone camera parts factory in Guangzhou owned by Sony went on strike for two weeks after the company announced the sale of the plant to a local company. They feared that working conditions and pay would suffer and jobs would be lost under the new ownership. To end the protest, the Japanese company paid off the workers with one thousand yuan each and fired dozens of strike leaders. Finally, on 23 November, protests erupted among workers in three plants owned by Coca-Cola in Chongqing, Chengdu, and Jilin province, when it was announced that the American company was going to sell all its bottling plants in China to a Chinese state-owned food giant. The workers feared that after the sale they would lose their jobs or get lower wages, so they launched these coordinated strikes to demand the disclosure of the details of the agreement and economic compensation.

(Sources: Caixin, China Labour Bulletin, Nikkei, Red Balloon Solidarity, The Guardian)