

## China Arrests Labour Activists amid Crackdown on Human Rights Defenders

In early January, four Chinese labour activists were formally arrested in Guangdong province, amid a crackdown on labour and human rights defenders. Rights groups say the current clampdown on dissent is the most sweeping in two decades in China. Labour is a particularly sensitive issue, as a slowing economy has led to a surge in labour disputes, particularly in the southern manufacturing powerhouse of Guangdong. Zeng Feiyang, Director of the Panyu Migrant Workers Centre and one of China's most prominent labour activists, was charged with 'disrupting social order.' Two other activists of the same organisation, Meng Han and Zhu Xiaomei, have also been arrested on the same charge, with the latter subsequently released on bail. He Xiaobo, Director of Nanfeiyang, a labour group based in Foshan, was arrested on a charge of embezzlement. A formal arrest usually leads to a trial. Among the arrested activists, Zeng Feiyang, leader of the organisation, became the object of a violent smear campaign in the Chinese official media. Xinhua published a long article, later reprised by the state television, in which Zeng was accused, among other things, of embezzling funding illegally obtained from foreign donors, of being greedy, and of always being eager to promote himself as a 'star of the labour movement' without any regard for the actual interests of the workers. He was also accused of several instances of sexual misconduct. Nanfeiyang and the Panyu Migrant Workers Center have both sued the Xinhua journalist for libel over his report.

(Sources: [Radio Free Asia](#), [Reuters](#), [Xinhua](#))

## Ningxia Officials Address Migrant Workers' Back Pay After Bus Attack

On 5 January, Ma Yongping, a migrant construction worker angry about unpaid wages, set a public bus on fire, killing seventeen people in Yinchuan, the capital of the northwestern province of Ningxia. Earlier on the same day, Ma had complained on social media that he had not been paid for his work and that his grievances had been ignored by local officials. The provincial government has since launched a campaign to ensure that companies pay migrant workers on time before Spring Festival, when many return home for family reunions. A slowing economy means some factory bosses are running out of money and building projects are sitting idle. In a report published in mid-December, the government of Yinchuan revealed that in the first ten months of 2015 it had dealt with more than 500 cases of unpaid wages, 22.3 percent more than in the same period of the previous year. The cases involved 10,000 migrant workers who were owed 1.48 billion yuan. Looking more broadly at this situation, the government of Ningxia identified twenty-seven construction companies that had delayed the payment of salaries to migrant workers in the first ten months of last year. Besides the criminal punishments allowed by the recently amended Chinese criminal law—fines and jail terms of up to seven years—these firms were forbidden to bid on government projects. On 19 January, the State Council released a new opinion on how to deal with the problem of the non-payment of wages for migrant workers.

(Sources: [Caixin](#), [State Council](#))



PC: XINHUA



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## Grassroots Worker Elected to Top Trade Union Leadership

Ju Xiaolin, a technician and former migrant worker from northwestern Shaanxi province, became the Vice Chair of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). 'I was very surprised and I feel honoured to become the Vice-Chairman of the ACFTU. I will continue to help protect the interests and rights of migrant workers,' Ju was quoted as saying by the Xinhua news agency. Ju, 53, is the first rural migrant worker to ever hold such a high post in the official Chinese union. A technician with a middle school diploma, he has worked for China CREC Railway Electrification Bureau Group since 1987, contributing to the construction of traditional and high-speed railways. He was a model worker and in 2014 he was elected to the National People's Congress, China's top legislature, as a deputy. The move reflects the central authorities' push to make the ACFTU better represent the interests of the rank-and-file workers, especially migrants. Lu Hui, an Associate Professor in sociology at Peking University, while welcoming the news, cautioned that 'institutional reform is needed at the lower level of trade unions to attract and retain more experienced migrant workers.' 'Trade unions are a bridge. I have a lot of contact with migrant workers. I will pay more attention to the protection of their interests,' said Ju.

(Source: [Xinhua](#))

Ju Xiaolin, new Vice-Chairman of the ACFTU.



PC: SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST

## Chinese Blogger Demands Answers over Funding to Help 'Left-Behind Children'

Zhou Xiaoyun, a well-known blogger, is taking legal action against the governments of Bijie City and Guizhou Province in southern China to make them reveal what happened to a 180 million yuan fund established to help 'left-behind children' in the area. The fund was started by Bijie city's government in 2012, after five 'left-behind children' died while sheltering from the cold in a rubbish skip. At the time, the plight of these youngsters sparked a debate over whether the authorities were doing enough to help them while their parents are away working. It was promised that the money in the Bijie fund would be used to improve children's living conditions and medical care. But four 'left-behind children' in Bijie killed themselves in June last year by drinking pesticide, while their father was living away from home. Zhou filed a request to the Bijie municipal government in June last year asking for details of how the fund had been spent and what impact had been made. The government replied that the information does not exist. Zhou filed another request soon after. The government only provided general numbers and failed to answer specific questions. Zhou then demanded that the Guizhou provincial government appeal to the authorities in Bijie to publish the relevant documents, but his request was rejected. Finally, in late December 2015, he filed an administrative lawsuit against the two governments at the Guiyang Intermediate People's Courts. The lawsuit was accepted and the case will probably soon be heard in court. In mid-February, the State Council released a guideline on the protection of 'left-behind children'. The document states that local governments and village committees should keep themselves well-informed about the situation of 'left-behind children' within their jurisdiction and ensure they are properly taken care of, while the primary responsibilities of parents are equally stressed.

(Sources: [South China Morning Post](#), [Xinhua](#))

## Labour Contract Law Under Attack for Harming Flexibility

While speaking at a Forum on 19th February, China's Minister of Finance Lou Jiwei criticised the Labour Contract Law passed in 2007 for harming the flexibility of the labour market and constraining productivity. On the sidelines of the National People's Congress, he reiterated his stance on 7th March, declaring that China's labour regulations harm workers by reducing job opportunities. According to him, the Labour Contract Law passed in 2007 restricts the ability of companies to fire their employees and as such it is discriminatory towards people entering the workforce. Concurrently, on 29th February, Minister of Human Resources and Social Security Yin Weimin announced that his ministry is currently studying the possibility of further changes to the Labour Contract Law to tackle the inflexibility of the labour market and high labour costs. China's leaders are also trying to rein in wage increases, favouring business interests at the expense of increasingly discontented workers. China's labour ministry recently urged 'steady and cautious control' over minimum wages and proposed a formula change that would slow wage increases. Meanwhile, in March, Guangdong province, one of China's main manufacturing hubs, announced a two-year freeze on minimum wages.

(Sources: [Caijing](#), [Caixin](#), [Daily Mail](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [Zhongguo Xinwen Wang](#))



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## Mass Layoffs Announced in the Coal and Steel Industries

According to Minister for Human Resources and Social Security Yin Weimin, China expects to lay off 1.8 million workers in the coal and steel industries to curb industrial overcapacity and pollution. Other sources say that there could be as many as five or six million laid-off workers. China will spend nearly 150 billion yuan to deal with the social and economic consequences of the restructuring of the coal and steel sectors in the next two to three years, but the overall figure is likely to rise as closures spread to other industries. Even more funding will be required to handle the debt left behind by 'zombie' state firms, the closure of which has been identified as one of the government's priorities this year. China aims to cut capacity gluts in as many as seven sectors, including cement, glassmaking, and shipbuilding. This is China's most significant industrial retrenchment since the restructuring of state-owned enterprises in the late nineties.

(Sources: [Quartz](#), [Reuters](#), [Sina](#))

(Left) Lou Jiwei, China's Minister of Finance. (Right) Yin Weimin, Minister for Human Resources and Social Security.



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