

JAN/MAR 2019

China to Address Gender-based Discrimination

The first quarter of 2019 has seen important steps taken to strengthen protection of women's rights. In December 2018, the ACWF lobbied the SPC to take into account the interests of women in judicial interpretation, develop a gender equality assessment mechanism, promote the legalisation of women's rights protection in cooperation with the ACWF itself, and protect rural women's land rights. In February 2019, nine ministries and mass organisations—including the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, the Ministry of Education, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the All-China Women Federation (ACWF), the Ministry of Justice, and the Supreme People's Court (SPC)—jointly released a document targeting gender-based discrimination in the hiring process and promoting women's participation in the workforce. According to the document, prospective employers must not restrict employment based on gender, nor inquire about the marital or childbearing status of the candidate. To enforce compliance, when a worker files a complaint the authorities now have a duty to meet with employers to rectify the discriminatory practice. In a setback, despite earlier positive reception of the policy recommendation, China's legislators failed once again to abolish the rules on the 'Detention and Reeducation for Those Involved in Prostitution', which allow the police to arbitrarily detain sex workers and send them to 'rehabilitation centres' without trial for up to two years (see Tiantian Zheng's essay in this issue). *KL*

(Sources: Caixin; China Court; China News; The New York Times; Voice of America)

Crackdown on Labour Activism Intensifies

In the first quarter of 2019, many of the Maoist students and activists at the centre of the Jasic struggle—including Yue Xin, Shen Mengyu, Gu Jiayue, Zheng Yongming, and He Pengchao—appeared in forced confession videos screened privately to student activists at Peking University. According to students who secretly recorded the audio, in the taped confessions the activists expressed regret for their beliefs and actions. The authorities hinted that those in the videos might soon go on trial. In a sign of widening repression, on 20 January five labour NGO activists—including prominent labour NGO leaders Wu Guijun and Zhang Zhiru—were arrested in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Changsha on charges of 'gathering a crowd to disturb public order' (see Lin's op-ed in this issue). The five activists were neither directly involved in the Jasic struggle, nor were they working together at the time of their arrests, leaving open the question of why they were targeted. In late March, Wei Zhili, an editor of the labour news portal 'New Generation' (新生代) and an activist for the rights of migrant workers affected by pneumoconiosis, was picked up by the police (see Zheng Churan's essay in this issue). Another two editors of the same platform also appear to be in trouble: Ke Chengbing, who at the moment of writing is still reported missing, and Yang Zhengjun, who was placed under residential surveillance in February. In this case, detention appears connected to these activists' support for migrant workers, who in late 2018 protested against the Shenzhen government and demanded compensation for having contracted pneumoconiosis, a deadly labour-related disease. In late March, the local authorities stopped a group of about one hundred pneumoconiosis workers from Hunan who were planning on travelling to Shenzhen to express solidarity with Wei Zhili. *KL*

(Sources: China Labour Bulletin; Hong Kong Free Press 1; Hong Kong Free Press 2; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; The New York Times)

Forced Labour in Xinjiang and Uyghur #MeToo

The year 2019 has not brought any positive changes to the state of affairs in Xinjiang. Official state policy has repeatedly asserted that Muslim ‘reeducation camps’ assume a crucial role in China’s fight against terrorism and separatism in Xinjiang, as the Chinese authorities claim to have arrested over 13,000 ‘terrorists’. However, there is now mounting evidence to suggest that such camps are institutionalising a system of forced labour. Comprised of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other minority groups, detainees at these camps are reportedly being moved to factories where they provide forced labour for free or at a very low-cost. On 9 February Turkey issued a statement denouncing China for ‘violating the fundamental human rights’ of its Muslim communities, deeming the nation’s actions ‘a great embarrassment for humanity’ and singling out the case of Abdurehim Heyit, a Uyghur musician who disappeared in 2017 and was rumoured to be dead. In an attempt to dispel such criticisms, China released a video of the man, who was very much alive. However, such efforts backfired, as this video inspired other Uyghurs to take to social media to demand that the Chinese government disclose the conditions of their loved ones. To do so, they coopted the hashtag #MeToo. At the same time, a petition calling for the release Uyghur professor Ilham Tohti five years after his arrest in 2014 was circulated. In another setback for the Chinese authorities, in February ethical hacker Victor Gevers exposed a data breach, which revealed that China has been closely tracking the location and identities of almost 2.6 million people in Xinjiang. This is yet more proof that the region has become a significant testing ground for facial recognition and surveillance technologies that have the potential to drastically reshape China’s domestic security apparatus. All of this led to condemnation from several Western governments, while the Swedish authorities have decided to grant refugee status to all Uyghurs from Xinjiang. *TS*

(Sources: Financial Times; Forbes; The Diplomat; The Guardian 1; The Guardian 2; The New York Times; South China Morning Post)

Human Rights on Trial

The first quarter of 2019 has seen the continued repression of human rights advocates, lawyers, and civil society groups. On 14 January, blogger Huang Qi was tried for leaking state secrets. In a sad turn of events, his mother was detained after approaching foreign embassies in Beijing for assistance in obtaining the release of her son. Likewise, in the days that followed, lawyer Chen Wuquan was found guilty of ‘picking quarrels and stirring up trouble’, and sentenced to five years in prison. On 25 January, activist Liu Feiyue was handed a five-year sentence for ‘inciting state subversion’. This sentence came one day after human rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang was sentenced to four and a half years’ imprisonment on similar subversion charges. Worryingly, Wang’s appeal was reportedly erased from the Tianjin court system where it was expected to be held. To end the month, blogger Liu Yanli also stood trial for similar charges after ‘insulting’ Mao Zedong and CCP leaders in a series of WeChat posts in September 2016. At the time of writing, a verdict has not been handed down, however it is understood that the prosecution has pressed for a three- or four-year jail term. In early March, Lu Tingge, a human rights lawyer based in Shijiazhuang, went missing after posting an online petition asking for constitutional changes. Repression does not spare even foreign citizens. On 19 January, writer and former diplomat Yang Hengjun, an Australian citizen, was detained while travelling in China pending an investigation for ‘endangering state security’. In February, lawyers hired by Yang’s wife were denied access to him. On a more positive note, in February human rights lawyer Jiang Tianyong was released from prison after serving a two-year sentence for inciting state subversion. Jiang has since returned to his parents’ home in Henan province, although he is reportedly kept under close watch by the authorities. *TS*

(Sources: Financial Review; Radio Free Asia 1; Radio Free Asia 2; Radio Free Asia 3; Radio Free Asia 4; South China Morning Post; The Guardian 1; The Guardian 2; The New York Times)

China Goes to War with Academia

In the first quarter of 2019, the Chinese government's growing international assertiveness and influence have escalated tensions with the international academic community. On 22 January, China lashed out at 143 foreign academics and former diplomats who signed an open letter to President Xi Jinping demanding the release of two Canadians detained for 'endangering China's national security'. It is widely believed that the two were arrested as a reprisal for the decision of the Canadian judiciary to arrest Huawei's deputy chairwoman and CFO Meng Wanzhou in response to an extradition request from the United States. Hua Chunying, spokeswoman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, called the letter a 'great disrespect' that interfered with China's sovereignty and judicial procedures. In mid-February, Chami Lhamo, a Canadian citizen of Tibetan origin active in the Free Tibet movement, was bombarded with online hate messages after being elected as student president at the University of Toronto's Scarborough campus. The strong pro-China sentiment in the messages led to the suspicion that the Chinese government was behind this. Meanwhile, Rukiye Turdush, a Uyghur-Canadian activist, was videotaped and interrupted by a group of Chinese students while delivering a speech on China's mass internments of Uyghurs in Xinjiang at McMaster University, Canada. This group of Chinese students was believed to have been asked by the Chinese Consulate to collect information about Turdush and the organisers of her talk, and to observe whether any Chinese nationals attended her speech. In the meantime, several scholars in Chinese academic institutions were purged for having advanced views critical of the Chinese authorities. In the most notable instance, Xu Zhangrun, a law professor at Tsinghua University, was suspended and put under investigation for having published essays in which he rebuked the most recent policy shifts under Xi's leadership. *NLiu*

(Sources: ABC News; China Digital Times; Hong Kong Free Press; Radio Free Asia; The New York Times; The Straits Times; Tibetan Review)

Factory Explosions in Jiangsu

In March 2019, workplace safety issues came under the spotlight again in China. On 21 March, a deadly explosion occurred at the Jiangsu Tianjiayi Chemical Company, in Yancheng city, Jiangsu province, killing at least 64 people and injuring ten times as many. The explosion, as powerful as a 2.2 magnitude tremor, flattened the factory, destroyed 16 neighbouring plants, and rocked several nearby schools. Following the blast, police in Yancheng took its executives into custody, and officials relocated more than 4,000 workers and residents to safer areas, while ordering an inspection of all factories dealing with hazardous chemicals and demanding severe punishment for those found to have broken the rules. President Xi Jinping, who at the time of the explosion was visiting Italy, ordered an expeditious investigation into the incident and demanded that governments at all levels strengthen safety inspection procedures. Still, ten days later, on 31 March, a second explosion at metal-moulding plant in the city of Kunshan, also in Jiangsu province, claimed the lives of another seven victims. Chinese authorities have called for enhanced workplace safety for years, but large-scale industrial disasters remain prevalent in the country. The gravest incident in recent years occurred at a chemical storage warehouse in the port city of Tianjin in August 2015: on that occasion, massive explosions at the warehouse resulted not only in hundreds of casualties, but also in severe disruptions to industrial production and port operations. Other recent fatal accidents include the collapse of a power plant in Fengcheng, Jiangxi province, in November 2016; the explosion of a natural gas pipeline in Qinglong, Guizhou province, in June 2018; and the blast at a chemical plant in Zhangjiakou, Hebei province, in November 2018. The recurrence of industrial tragedies, due largely to weak regulatory enforcement, underscores the daunting challenges in ensuring workplace safety faced by the Chinese government. *NLiu*

(Sources: Caixin; CCTV; China Labour Bulletin; NetEase; Reuters; South China Morning Post; Wall Street Journal)