

Guangdong province (China): Justice for the Eight Comrades

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Simon I. reports on the crackdown against eight young leftist activists in China's Guangdong province—and what it may say about future struggles.



Commuting workers arrive at the outskirts of Beijing

SINCE LAST November, a group of eight young leftist activists have been facing prosecution by Chinese police in Guangzhou, the capital city of the Guangdong province, located on China's southern coast.

As this article was being readied for publication, charges against four of the activists were apparently dropped—but activists continued the struggle to win justice for all eight.

Guangdong province, where the eight activists organize, is famous for being one of China's primary destinations for millions of migrant workers and a front line of labor struggles.

On December 22, 2017, the news broke that Zhang Yunfan, a recent graduate of Peking University who worked on labor organizing in Guangzhou, was detained on November 15 while attending a reading group held at the Guangdong University of Technology. He was charged with “assembling a crowd to disrupt public order.”

According to Chinese law, police must gather sufficient evidence that warrants an official arrest within a month after a person is detained, or release them. However, on December 15, the police neither officially arrested nor released Zhang, but sent him to reside in a monitored, unspecified location—a form of informal, clandestine detention.

An online campaign to free Zhang instantly went viral on the Chinese internet, despite the fact that relevant posts were repeatedly censored and removed on China's social media. Within 24 hours of the news of Zhang's detention, more than 100 people signed a public letter calling for his release.

Partly due to such efforts to draw public attention to the case, Zhang was released on bail on December 29, though the charge against him wasn't dropped. It was discovered that Zhang was only one of eight activists—known as the “Eight Comrades” ever since—who were prosecuted by the Guangzhou police.

Since mid-January, all of these Eight Comrades have published open letters [[1](#)], three of which have been translated into English, detailing what happened to them, despite immense political risks in doing so.

IN 2017, Zheng Yongming, a Marxist activist working Guangzhou initiated a reading group at the Guangdong University of Technology, in which fellow activists, including Zhang Yunfan and Ye Jianke and other college students, participated.

Explicitly focusing on leftist thought and struggles of China's oppressed classes, the reading groups convened sessions on the conditions faced by rural migrant workers, the history of the "Reform and Opening" era and the Cultural Revolution, according to Ye's open letter.

The reading group knit together a community of leftist activists and became a vehicle that brought college students closer to workers.

It organized students to conduct research visits in various factories surrounding Guangzhou and planned numerous cultural activities—especially regular "singing and dancing" sessions—that brought together students, activists and campus workers, most of whom were precarious migrants.

Labor organizing in the workplace was almost impossible given China's highly repressive regime, and these cultural activities provided rare opportunities to build class solidarity. On November 15, as the reading group was holding a session on workers' rights and the 1989 pro-democracy movement, police and campus security personnel broke into the room and searched people's IDs.

Six people were taken into custody, and two of them, Zhang and Ye, were subsequently detained because they didn't have their IDs. The police then charged them with "assembling a crowd to disrupt public order" and began to identify other activists associated with their networks.

Zheng was detained on December 5, and Sun Tingting, who did not participate in the reading group sessions, but was closely involved in the cultural activities with campus workers, was detained three days later.

Four other activists who either participated in the reading group or the cultural activities it organized have been put on the police's "wanted" list, and are on the run.

According to Zhang's open letter, the cops who interrogated him coerced him into admitting to having "radical" and politically dangerous thought and "organizing political conspiracy." Sun's letter detailed many inhumane actions she went through while in detention, such as being denied medical care she critically needed.

IN THEIR open letters, these activists also shared experiences of their political radicalization. Many of them were from working-class or rural backgrounds, and all of them were exposed to Marxist thought in class or through club activities in college.

Though the state promoted an "official" version of Marxism as an ideological tool to justify its authoritarian capitalist rule, these activists found in Marxism something quite different: a powerful lens to make sense of class inequalities and oppressions, to which they had already been sensitized, and to fight the system producing these inequalities and oppressions.

They subsequently embarked on further and deeper reading and discussion of Marxist and Maoist writings on their own.

In college, these activists participated in various kinds of activism and social work that connected

them to workers, peasants and other marginalized populations. Zhang, for example, was a leader of Peking University's Marxist Student Association and led a systematic study on the conditions of campus workers there.

The research report published by the association—which detailed numerous violations of workers' rights, such as employers' refusal to sign contracts with workers, late or underpayment of wages and terrible housing—drew wide public attention and resulted in the university administration terminating the association's official club status because it posed "political trouble" for the university.

Though the report was quickly censored, it helped workers achieve limited but nevertheless substantial improvements on their working conditions.

Upon graduation from college, these activists chose to come to Guangdong province, where labor struggles were particularly intense, and take jobs in activism and social work, rather than higher-paying jobs they could have secured otherwise.

Gu Jiayue, one of the four activists on the "wanted" list, quit her doctoral studies in medicine halfway and joined the organizing in Guangzhou.

THESE ACTIVISTS exemplified a larger trend: in recent years, an increasing number of college graduates, especially those from China's top universities, have devoted their careers to labor activism and organizing.

In 2011, several graduates of Peking University and Sun Yat-Sen University founded the Qinghu Community College, which offered educational opportunities, community-building programs, legal services and psychological counseling to workers.

Since then, it has grown to be one of the leading labor organizations in Shenzhen, the city where many labor-intensive factories, including Foxconn, were clustered.

Welcome news came on February 24, when it was learned that the police had removed the four activists from the "wanted" list, effectively deciding against prosecuting them. The charges against the other four activists who were detained and then released on bail still remain as of now.

Though it's unclear why the police decided to partially roll back the crackdown, what's clear is the key role that the activists being prosecuted played themselves, as they courageously took to social media to share their stories, denounce the police attack and reaffirm their willingness to keep up their fight.

The uncompromising stance they have taken created substantial public pressure and energized various networks of Chinese activists, liberal and leftist alike.

These activists displayed a significant level of courage and commitment in devoting their life to organizing and building solidarity with China's working class. In doing so, they stood up to the Chinese state, one of the most repressive regimes in the world.

Socialists all over the world should stand in solidarity with them

Simon I.

P.S.

* Socialist Worker, February 28, 2018:

<https://socialistworker.org/2018/02/28/justice-for-the-eight-comrades>

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 42953), [China - Locked Up for Reading Books: Voices from the November 15th Incident](#).