

Shenzhen : Chinese Bike Light Strikers Occupy Factory, Face Firings and Arrests

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Workers at a bike light factory in Shenzhen, China, have been on strike since April 30. They stayed overnight in the factory for two weeks, stopping production and delivery, until police evicted them and arrested leaders.

Workers who make bike lights at a factory in Shenzhen, China, have been on strike since April 30, demanding that the company pay up what it legally owes them.

The strikers stayed overnight in the factory, stopping production and delivery for two weeks, until police came to evict them and arrest worker leaders on May 13.

New An Lun Lamp, a Taiwanese-owned factory, produces bicycle lights for brands including the German Messingschlager and Buchel and the Dutch AXA.

There are about 100 workers in the factory, mostly middle-aged women, with some nearing retirement.

Though their actions have been peaceful, thus far 13 workers have been fired and nine arrested by police for “disrupting public order.”

Seven out of the nine detained workers were released within 24 hours. The other two—including one of the workers’ elected representatives—were held by police for seven days. During the police raid on May 13 these two clutched the legs of the general manager and his son, crying and begging them not to remove the finish goods.

Last year, according to a conservative estimate by China Labour Bulletin, there were 1,379 strikes and labor protests in China, up from just 185 in 2011. One of the biggest was a strike by 48,000 workers at the Yue Yuen shoe factory, the world’s largest manufacturer of athletic shoes, whose customers include Nike and Adidas.

MONEY OWED TO WORKERS

New An Lun Lamp has broken China’s labor laws and social insurance policies by failing to contribute to both the workers’ pension fund and a housing fund aimed at helping workers buy or rent apartments.

The workers also haven’t been paid for the sick leave, maternity leave, work injury leave, and marriage leave to which they are legally entitled. And they have been requested to report for duty 10 minutes earlier in the morning and after lunch every day, without being paid overtime. In addition, the company has failed to pay a legally-required high temperature allowance.

Access to bathrooms is another major grievance. Bathrooms are locked during working

hours—leaving the more than 70 women to use the eight female stalls during the break.

The company has adopted dictatorial managerial practices, including penalizing workers who fail to meet the production targets or are seen as troublemakers by locking them in solitary confinement. The strike was partly triggered by an incident in which one female worker fainted and was hospitalized after being put into solitary confinement for a whole day.

In April, workers sent a petition demanding that the factory correct these problems. In response, the company asked them to elect representatives, with whom it held one negotiating session.

When workers didn't get a satisfactory response, they went on strike on April 28 and began an occupation of the factory the next day.

FACTORY SENT THUGS

Once the strike began, the company, together with various government representatives at the district level, asked the workers for further negotiations. But so far it has refused to fully address their demands.

For instance, while many workers are owed seven to 12 years of pension fund contributions, the company is only offering to pay for two years, claiming this is in line with government policies.

Factory management has deployed dirty tactics. It sent a gang of thugs on May 11 to attack the workers and try to remove finished bike lights from the worker-occupied factory. Workers successfully stopped the thugs from removing boxes of products, but some workers were injured in the conflict.

On May 13, the factory fired six of the worker representatives without following the procedures dictated by national and provincial labor laws, which state that companies must notify trade unions of any dismissals and promptly consider any objections from the unions. Moreover, management has turned a blind eye to the new Guangdong Provincial Regulations on Collective Contracts for Enterprises, which state that enterprises cannot fire worker representatives while they are performing their duties of negotiation.

But new regulations in Guangdong (where the New An Lun factory is located) also make it illegal to strike during negotiations—the first such law officially prohibiting strikes. Worker advocates fear that this law will be used to crack down on the growing number of strikes and sentence worker leaders to long prison terms—something the Chinese government has thus far hesitated to do in most cases.

POLICE RAID

Even worse, the same day the workers were fired, the local police station sent 100 police officers to the factory to help the company transport the finished bike lights.

Police arrested nine workers, including four of the fired strike representatives. They accused the nine of disrupting “public security,” despite the fact that the strike has been entirely peaceful. In China the government seldom arrests workers on the grounds of striking. Instead, workers are arrested under various charges of disrupting public order when they march outside of factories or prevent the delivery of finished products.

On May 18 the company fired another seven workers for not performing their duties. One was a worker representative, while five others were among those arrested by the police.

Labor groups and trade unions from Taiwan have launched a petition to urge the Taiwanese boss to respect the rights of the New An Lun Lamp workers. In a May 15 press conference they condemned the company's illegal actions.

The same day, labor groups and trade unions visited the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office and the Taiwan Business Association in Hong Kong, to urge them both to more seriously monitor Taiwanese firms in China.

Inside China, 14 organizations have signed a joint letter to New An Lun Lamp and its major European customers. Labor groups supporting the strikers are also seeking solidarity from trade unions in Germany and the Netherlands.

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P.S.

* Labor Notes, May 20, 2015:

<http://labornotes.org/2015/05/chinese-bike-light-strikers-occupy-factory-face-firings-and-arrests#sthash.nb0nMKoL.dpuf>

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