

Collective protests begin to flare up again as China returns to work

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After a month in which there were virtually no worker protests in China because much of the country was on lockdown, workers are beginning to take collective action again.

Many protests have been related to the economic distress caused by the covid-19 epidemic.

China Labour Bulletin's Strike Map (1) has recorded 25 incidents since businesses outside the central province of Hubei tentatively resumed production after the extended Lunar New Year break in mid- and late-February.

This is still a very low number compared with previous years and most protests were relatively small-scale, but given that covid-19 is still prevalent in many parts of the country, it is remarkable that there are any collective protests and demonstrations at all.

Many of the protests were in **service and transport** industries that were already experiencing economic difficulties prior to the covid-19 outbreak.

On 10 March, for example, **more than a thousand taxi drivers** in the southwestern city of Liuzhou (2) staged a protest demanding the suspension of cab rental fees and the right to sell their vehicle back to the cab company with no penalty. Drivers said that even though people were returning to work, the lack of passengers made it impossible for them to earn a living.

There was a noticeable increase in the number of taxi driver protests (3) prior to the covid-19 outbreak at the end of last year as pent-up frustrations over local government regulations, cab company management and especially competition from ride-app and unlicensed drivers erupted in a series of large-scale and sometimes violent protests.

Most of the recent worker protests have been related to **wage arrears and layoffs**. Several workers at a **snack food** company in Beijing, for example, staged a protest on 10 March (4) after the company refused to pay three months' wages in arrears totalling nearly 400,000 yuan even after an arbitration court ordered it to pay up.

The previous day, 9 March, there was a protest by **medical staff** at a private hospital in Zibo (5), Shandong, who were also owed three months' pay and claimed moreover that the hospital was using expired medical supplies.

In another Beijing protest, workers demonstrated against the mandatory **unpaid leave** policy (6) implemented by **online service provider** 58.com (7) that would only give staff a subsidy equal to 80 percent of the local monthly minimum wage, far from a living wage.

There were also several protests in early March by **small shop and restaurant owners** demanding rent cuts because of the drastic downturn in business they had experienced since the onset of the epidemic.

The Financial Times (8) noted that family-run shops, street stalls, hole-in-the-wall eateries and other small businesses employ about 230 million people in China and are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks because they have less capital and are less able to borrow.

Construction workers, including some workers who were recruited to build emergency hospitals for covid-19 patients in Wuhan (9), have also been forced to protest over unpaid wages. Most recently workers at a construction site in Zhoukou, Henan, (10) were beaten after staging a wage arrears protest.

As normal production gradually resumes in China, workers who are already struggling after months of economic disruption will be more determined than ever to ensure their rights to remuneration, social insurance and compensation are not violated.

Notes:

1. Strike Map <https://maps.clb.org.hk/>
 2. Taxi drivers in Liouzhou https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/d2rD72E3i_3MfzA5Nx5xkA
https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/d2rD72E3i_3MfzA5Nx5xkA
 3. Taxi drivers protests
<https://clb.org.hk/content/latent-grievances-erupt-massive-taxi-driver-protests-across-china>
<https://clb.org.hk/content/latent-grievances-erupt-massive-taxi-driver-protests-across-china>
 4. Protest on 10 March
https://www.weibo.com/5820218114/IxZ6xfAgB?type=comment#_rnd1584422107970
https://www.weibo.com/5820218114/IxZ6xfAgB?type=comment#_rnd1584422107970
 5. private hospital in Zibo, Shandong,
https://www.weibo.com/7219047645/IxNLP0yKk?type=comment#_rnd1584422119354
 6. Unpaid leave policy
<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/NDytsab0BGAEd-KtPBEEsg>
 7. 58.com
<http://58.com/>
 8. Financial Times
<https://www.ft.com/content/ea3d7c2-629c-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5>
 9. Construction workers
<https://clb.org.hk/content/construction-workers-under-pressure-more-cities-rush-build-hospitals>
 10. Construction site https://www.weibo.com/u/7413170398?profile_ftype=1&is_all=1
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<https://clb.org.hk/content/collective-protests-begin-flare-again-china-returns-work>