He Tried To Organize Workers In China's Gig Economy. Now He Faces 5 Years In Jail

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Zipping along Beijing's streets on an electric scooter with sometimes death-defying speed, Chen Guojiang delivered hundreds of take-out food orders a day.Along the way, he filmed short videos that documented the viciously competitive conditions for China's estimated 3 million workers who use digital platforms for delivery jobs.
More than once, he has called for collective action against powerful e-commerce companies, demanding better pay. That effectively made 31-year-old Chen — or Mengzhu, as he is more widely known — one of China's few remaining labor organizers.

Then in February, he disappeared. News emerged the next month that he was in detention.

His arrest dealt a blow to nascent efforts to promote labor rights that have begun to gain mainstream traction during the coronavirus pandemic. It also reflects the political risks of agitating on behalf of delivery work in a country whose ruling Communist Party has shut down labor organizing and is betting on consumerism and the service industry to buoy economic growth.

"Anything that coheres collective power for workers is seen as a threat to state power," says Eli Friedman, a professor at Cornell University who studies Chinese labor activism. *"[The authorities] cannot accept an independent trade union or anything that looks a little bit like an independent trade union. That is a red line for the Chinese government."*

In March, nearly one month after his disappearance, authorities confirmed police had detained Mengzhu for picking quarrels and provoking trouble — a catch-all charge commonly used to detain both petty criminals and political activists.

However, Mengzhu's case is being handled with an unusual degree of secrecy.
Shortly after police confirmed Mengzhu would be tried on criminal charges, friends and supporters began collecting donations to cover his lawyer fees. Within days, they had raised about $20,000 — and the attention of China's state security forces.
Security agents contacted each of the donation campaign organizers, warning them not to help Mengzhu, according to two people close to the organizers. They requested anonymity when talking to NPR because they feared state intimidation as well.

His family says two policemen traveled in March from Beijing to Mengzhu's hometown in Bijie, a prefecture in remote southwestern Guizhou province. They brought with them a short detention notice informing the family that Mengzhu was being held in a police station in Beijing's Chaoyang district, where he lived.

His father, Chen Wanhua, says the two police officers demanded he sign the notice. The copy he was allowed to keep had three lines conspicuously smudged out, and he was instructed to deliver the original in a sealed envelope to the local police station.
"I have no idea what those three lines said," the elder Chen says from his home, tucked among the

mountains of Bijie. Mengzhu faces a sentence of up to five years in prison.

Mengzhu's arrest comes even as same-day delivery workers are gaining more social recognition in China for the crucial economic and social role they play.
During widespread lockdowns imposed during China's coronavirus epidemic, delivery workers became a lifeline, shuttling anything from food to medicine to millions of people trapped at home.

Some of China's biggest private companies such as Baidu, Alibaba and JD.com run lucrative e-commerce and food platforms that rely on delivery workers to brave urban traffic, extreme weather and broken elevators to fulfill orders.
Companies have defended the tightly managed gig work, arguing it has created new jobs and a flexible source of supplemental income. After home delivery services began proliferating about five years ago, the average wage for couriers hovered around 10,000 yuan ($1,500) per month, more than twice the average salary at the time. Delivery salaries have since dropped to about $800, according to an industry association.

Last year, delivery workers fulfilled some 60 billion orders across China, according to government figures. Even as the volume of packages and express coffee orders climb, average pay for delivery workers is dropping. NPR found last year that companies have been cutting the per-package commissions they pay couriers by an average of 25%. Workers say tighter delivery time windows force them to drive dangerously in China's congested cities. Being late automatically incurs heavy fines they cannot dispute.

Some e-commerce delivery workers have tried to organize wildcat strikes demanding higher pay and a less exhausting work schedule.
"Workers can be just banned from using the [delivery] app again because they have caused some trouble against the platform," says Aidan Chau, a researcher at the Hong Kong-based nonprofit China Labour Bulletin.

Strikes are becoming less frequent, however. CLB found at least 73 protests and strikes in the delivery industry in 2019 but only 41 last year, as the pandemic hit lower income workers hard. *"A lot of new workers are facing economic hardships, so they are more tolerant to these labor practices," Chau* says.

Fast-talking and street smart, Mengzhu tried to reverse that trend. On social media, he was followed by tens of thousands of delivery workers and drivers on Douyin, the Chinese-language version of the video-sharing network TikTok.

At first, delivery work gave him a way to leave behind a difficult childhood in Bijie, an area once infamous for its poverty.
His mother abandoned the family when Mengzhu was still in elementary school.
Mengzhu dropped out of school in fifth grade, and at age 14, he left Bijie in search of work in China's big cities, like many young men from his village. With savings from earlier delivery jobs, he opened two fast-food restaurants in Beijing. When they failed to turn a profit, he returned to delivery work and picked up video blogging and got involved with labor activism. He opened a cellphone accessory store in Beijing and ran a free shelter for other delivery workers who were new to the city.

Organizing delivery workers is difficult, particularly in food delivery. They are often freelance contractors or work for a loose confederation of third-party services, which then bid against one another to fulfill orders from bigger e-commerce platforms. The challenges clearly frustrated Mengzhu, who vented about his cohort on a Chinese podcast.
"To be frank, delivery workers are an uncivilized lot who are extremely short-sighted," Mengzhu

bemoaned in a Chinese podcast.

Yet he persisted. On Douyin, he posted videos almost daily, sharing snippets of his delivery routes and featuring other "riders," as the workers are called in Chinese, down on their luck. The goal, he said repeatedly, was to create a collective understanding among workers that they faced common challenges.
"Delivery workers are humans too, not robots, though the system wants to make us like cogs in a machine," he told viewers last spring, after a series of Chinese media investigations brought the sector's demanding work conditions to mainstream attention.
Mengzhu's social media accounts have been deleted since his arrest in February.

Despite its socialist roots, the Chinese state is extremely wary of collective action. Its Communist Party-governed system operates a state-run union, but authorities have detained dozens of labor organizers in the past for trying to set up independent shops.

Mengzhu was no stranger to such trouble. In October 2019, he spent nearly a month in detention for trying to organize a three-day walkout among Beijing logistics workers ahead of the country's Nov. 11 major online shopping holiday.
"They can do everything to arrest you, fix you with a criminal charge, sentence you to years in prison, and you change nothing," he recounted last September, about his detention. *"So do other delivery workers still dare [to complain]? Well, I dare."*

Amy Cheng contributed research from China's Guizhou province.

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https://www.npr.org/2021/04/13/984994360/he-tried-to-organize-workers-in-chinas-gig-economy-now-he-faces-5-years-in-jail