

Protests Spotlight China Labor Tension

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BEIJING — Protests by Hong Kong groups over the stabbing of a labor leader in Shenzhen reflect how tensions are bubbling up in southern China ahead of Jan. 1, when the country's new labor laws take effect.

China's nascent labor movement has been growing more vocal as the nation experiences a widening gap between rich and poor, a concern the government has been trying to address. Because of Hong Kong's proximity to southern China's manufacturing heartland and because many China-related labor groups are based in Hong Kong, the city's worker-rights groups have become involved in mainland matters.

The new labor laws are China's most significant overhaul of workplace regulation in a decade. Companies face more-stringent regulations on hiring and firing. Under one provision, employees who have worked at a company for 10 consecutive years are entitled to sign labor contracts with no fixed time frame, which basically grants them permanent jobs.

The Hong Kong groups say Huang Qingnan, who runs a center that counsels migrant workers, was attacked last week because of his work there. The 34-year-old activist is hospitalized with severe injuries and could lose a leg because of infection, according to friends who visited him. Shenzhen police said they are investigating.

"If justice is not done for this case, it will give a misleading message to the attackers, and more labor groups and their staff would be harmed," a consortium of Hong Kong labor groups said in a statement Monday. The consortium includes Workers' Empowerment, Labor Action China, Asia Monitor Resources Centre, Globalization Monitor, and Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior.

The organizations are appealing to Chinese authorities to help reopen Mr. Huang's worker center, provide him with proper medical treatment and improve the protection of civic groups.

Mr. Huang's organization has been in operation for about four years. Its staff of five has offered counseling, including advising laid-off workers on how to seek fair compensation from employers.

Such advice appears to be in heavier demand in recent months following increasing reports of layoffs at small factories in southern China, said Dominique Muller, Hong Kong spokeswoman for the Brussels-based International Trade Union Confederation. Labor analysts say they believe employers are laying off workers now in anticipation of the stricter new laws. Early this month, Chinese telecommunications-network equipment maker Huawei Technologies Co., asked employees who had worked for eight consecutive years to reapply for their positions, according to state news agency Xinhua. The plan sparked controversy, and Xinhua said Huawei later agreed to suspend it after discussions with China's umbrella trade group, the All China Federation of Trade Unions.

Huawei didn't respond to requests for comment. Mr. Huang became involved in labor rights after being the victim of an attack in 1999. At the time, he was employed by a food factory. Mr. Huang was disfigured after acid was thrown on his face while he was sleeping in the factory's dormitory,

according to his lawyer Zhou Litai, a civil-rights attorney.

The company paid some of Mr. Huang's medical bills. But in a court case that lasted four years, he unsuccessfully sued the company for compensation for the attack.

P.S.

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