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# Migrant Unrest in China

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An Analysis

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## About the Author

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### About "Inside China" Series

The China Research Program (CRP) within the Institute, as a part of its activities, undertake research and organise events under "Inside China," aimed at exploring issues and challenges in contemporary China covering economic aspects of China's growth, political development and emerging social tensions and fault lines. This essay was a part of the first annual conference in 2011.

# Migrant Unrest in China

## An Analysis

Namrata Hasija

China's rising economic power is a constant irritant for the world at large; however, its lopsided growth has become an area of major concern for the Chinese government as well. With the establishment of large manufacturing units, export houses and numerous industries, there has been an influx of migrant labourers from rural to urban areas and also from one urban area to another in search of better jobs. This essay deals with the rural migrant labourers in China.

With over 153 million migrant workers in China, the increasing number of violent demonstrations led by them has made the Communist Party of China (CPC) jittery. The growing unrest is causing ripples among the leaders of the Communist Party of China as can be perceived through their speeches and promises that their main priority is to improve the lives of the migrants and also an acknowledgment by President Hu Jintao that the unrest is seen as one of the threats to China's stability. It is very important to analyse these violent outbursts to assess the challenges that they can pose for the CPC.

Several questions need to be addressed: why are these demonstrations taking place? Are the demonstrations spontaneous outbursts or organized? What is the pattern of these demonstrations? Are there any change in the approach of the migrant labourers towards the party and their rights?

### I "HUKOU": THE CHINESE HOUSEHOLD SYSTEM

Most of the problems faced by the rural migrants are because of the Chinese household system, *Hukou*, which bifurcate the urban and rural population. *Hukou* is a system of differential benefits, given to urban and rural citizens ostensibly in order to support an economic system where the rural population produces to support urban populations and industrialisation while preventing rural migrations to urban areas in order to maintain urban economic and infrastructural viability. This system not only defined the parameters of one's relationship with the state but also the benefits one could derive from the state. The urban population and non-producers were entitled to numerous benefits from the state like food grains, housing, medical care and so on.

Hukou system was first experimented in the cities in 1951 and gradually extended to the villages in 1955. However, with the freedom granted to the Chinese nationals to move anywhere inside China there was a large influx of population from villages to the cities. The National People's Congress in 1958 thus, brought out its first set of *hukou* legislation formalising what had thus far been a pilot project. According to it, *hukou* had two classifications one by *hukou* type and one by *hukou* residential location.

	Urban locals		Urban Migrants		Rural Migrants	
	Cases	Percent	Cases	Percent	Cases	Percent
Job searching						
Government Assignment	82	20.9	4	1.1	13	1.3
Private employment agency	6	1.5	16	4.3	51	5.1
Government employment agency	19	4.8	11	2.9	18	1.8
Friend/Relative's Recommendation	84	21.6	102	27.3	417	41.4
Job searching on one's own	60	15.3	96	25.7	302	30.0
Response to job advertisement	23	5.9	46	12.3	33	3.3
Employer's job fair/recruitment	93	23.7	64	17.1	92	9.1
Other	25	6.4	35	9.4	81	8.0
Total	393	100	374	100	1007	100

Figure 1: Distribution of job searching channels by three groups (Guo and Cheng 2010: 22)

The *hukou* type is classified into two categories: *hukou leibie* which differentiates the citizens' status as agricultural and non agricultural and *hukou suozaidi*, the second classification based on the person's residential address, and the place where the person was registered became his only permanent residential address (Chan and Zhang 1999: 821). However, in general literature the both the classifications were simply put together in 'urban' and 'rural'. Thus, for convenience in this essay *hukou* and rural *hukou* is used.

The reason for introducing this system was not only to control migration of people but also to serve a number of political and economic functions for the state. It was an "unavoidable choice under the forging ahead or heavy industrialisation oriented development strategy" (Chang and Zhang 1999: 820) which required the rural population to produce and sell at low prices to support the industry.

The 1958 regulation passed by the National People's Congress (China's highest legislative body) is still the only national legislation on migration and residence (Chan 2009: 200). This law lays down that even if a person moved from one place to another his/her *hukou* remained the same unless the person went through a formal *hukou* conversion, that is *nongzhuanfei*. This conversion is a cumbersome process which requires a change in both residence and status and is granted via two channels "special" and "regular".

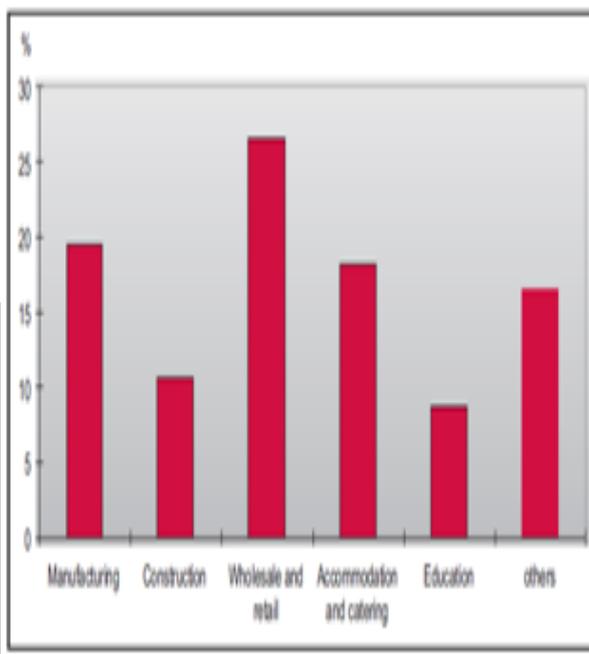
The common categories under the regular channel during Mao's period were recruitment by state owned enterprise, enrolment for higher education, promotion to senior administrative job and personal reasons (Chan 2009: 826-27). There was also an annual quota for the conversions which further hampered the process and fashioned long queues. "Within the regular channel, the policies of recruitment, enrolment, and

promotion are made by labour, education and personnel authorities respectively, and the conversion quotas are set by the State Planning Commission (MPS)" (Chan 2009: 827). Also, different types of migration require different qualifications set by various departments which leave much space to different interpretations and implications. Thus, there are more than one department responsible for the *nongzhuanfei* and also while the hukou regulations clearly stipulate the procedure for this process the qualifications are not clearly defined.

## II CHANGES IN THE HUKOU SYSTEM: POST 1979 REFORMS

After the reforms initiated by the Chinese government from 1979 onwards, many changes took place not only in the economy but socio political structures as well. With the de-collectivisation of land, there was a surplus of rural labour. The government tried to absorb this surplus by developing township-village enterprises (TVEs) and also to control the sudden influx of migrants to

Figure 2: Distribution of rural migrant workers by industry, 2007(Shi 2010: 10)



cities. With the restructuring of the state owned enterprises and foreign funded enterprises the growth of TVEs slowed down which gave impetus for the rural people to move towards the cities. The migration was also encouraged as the strong central control over migration was loosened for two reasons. First with the devolution of power to the lower levels of government the *hukou* reforms were also left to the local government to manage which led to different set of rules in different provinces.

Secondly, many cities wanted cheap and abundant labour supply for the emerging enterprises. The large influx of migrant labourers forced the local governments to adjust their *hukou* laws to incorporate them. One of the policies formed by Wuhan Province was to give temporary residential permits to the migrant workers as early as 1983. This attracted many workers to Wuhan and the MPS publicized it as a nationwide system in 1985 (Chan and Zhang 1999: 832). Initially all those staying away from their *hukou* location for more than three months were needed to register as temporary residents which was later reduced to one month. However, the central government left it to the local authorities to frame their own set of laws to regulate the flow of migrants plus the reforms for *hukou*. Other than this scheme another device called the photo citizen identity card was also popularized throughout the nation by the MPS in 1985.

Rural migrant labourers however, still could not enjoy social benefit schemes like medical facilities, state funded schools and so on as their *hukou* was still not an urban *hukou*. The rural migrant labourers are also socially differentiated as well as treated as outsiders and are called 'interlopers'. They fall at the lowest social level below the urban labourers and the urban migrant workers which have a strong advantage over the rural migrants

even in the job searching channels.

While these two categories get government assignments and are helped by the government employment agencies for getting a job, the rural migrants have to rely on either their friends in the cities or have to hunt for a job on their own (Guo and Cheng 2010: 22) (refer to Fig.1). This is also because of the reason that they are not the holders of urban *hukou*. Even the jobs that these migrants get are most menial and hazardous jobs for which they are paid very less. The bargaining power of these migrants are also negligible, leading to no proper signing of the contracts thus, guaranteeing no job security. The promised wages are also not paid on time and sometimes the unpaid wages into months altogether (Figure 2 and 3). The rural migrant labourers feel that even the government officials, police, and security personnel discriminate against them.

The family structure is also disintegrating for them as many of them have to send their children back to their villages as they do not enjoy the privilege of state funded schools which leads to further increase in social insecurities of the migrants. The spouses are also separated from each other for long periods as one has to go back to care of children and parents as housing is also very expensive in the cities and precludes the family as a unit moving into the city as one cohesive unit. Thus, their grievances range from unpaid wages, appalling working conditions to disparate treatment.

Another important factor is the demographic change in the migrant population which is increasingly made up of younger migrants or second and third generation migrants (Refer to Fig.4) with most of them born in the urban milieu, having no connection to their rural backgrounds. According to a survey, only 6.4 percent of them were willing to return to the

Figure 3: Distribution of Rural Migrant Workers by Occupation, 2007 (Shi 2010: 11)

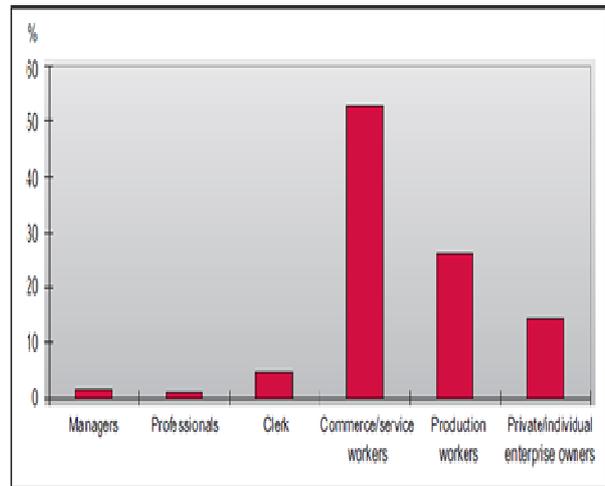
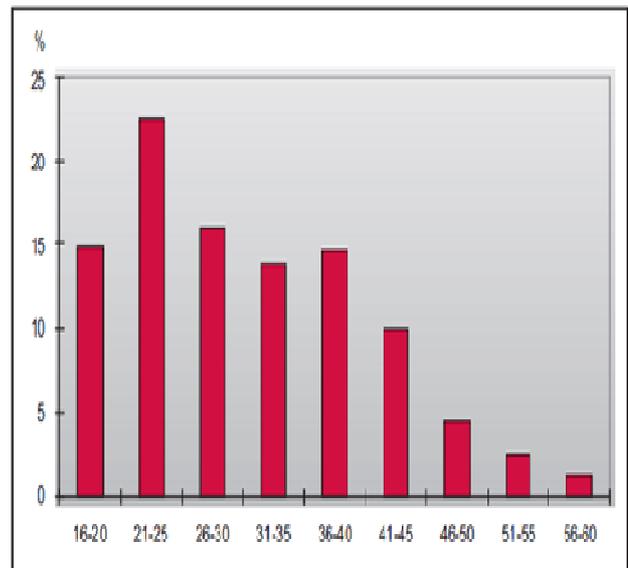


Figure 4: Age of rural migrant workers, 2007 (Shi 2010: 12)



countryside, with fewer sending back their wages to the countryside and majority wanting better wages, working conditions and acceptance in urban centres (Buckley and Pomfret 2011: 5). Not only does the *hukou* system take away their right to state funded security benefits but they also take away their political rights. Many municipal corporations like the Shanghai municipal people’s congress did not allow migrant worker delegates till 2006. They were even not admitted in the local trade unions.

This has given them a reason to protest against the discrimination meted out to them by the authorities. Many young migrants who were interviewed by various organizations gave statements like “they look down at the outsiders, so we let them know we won’t be bullied any longer”, “people have been waiting a long time for a chance to get them, they (security guards) discriminate against us” (Meyers 2011: 1) clearly show the simmering resentment against the authorities and also the rising awareness of their rights (Refer to Fig.5). The younger generation of the migrant population is willing to join any such protest which is linked to the migrant issue and thus, take ‘collective action’ for their cause.

All these grievances are leading to violent demonstrations in China (Refer to Fig.6), with incidences of rioting, protests, and mass petitions reaching 280,000 in 2010, according to Sun Liping, a Tsinghua

Figure 5: Demands of young migrants (Buckley and Pomfret 2011: 5)

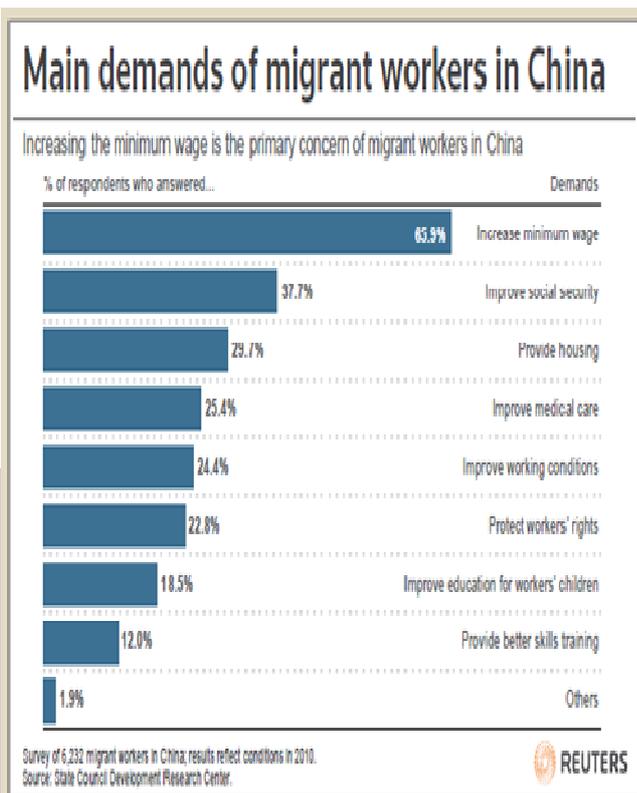
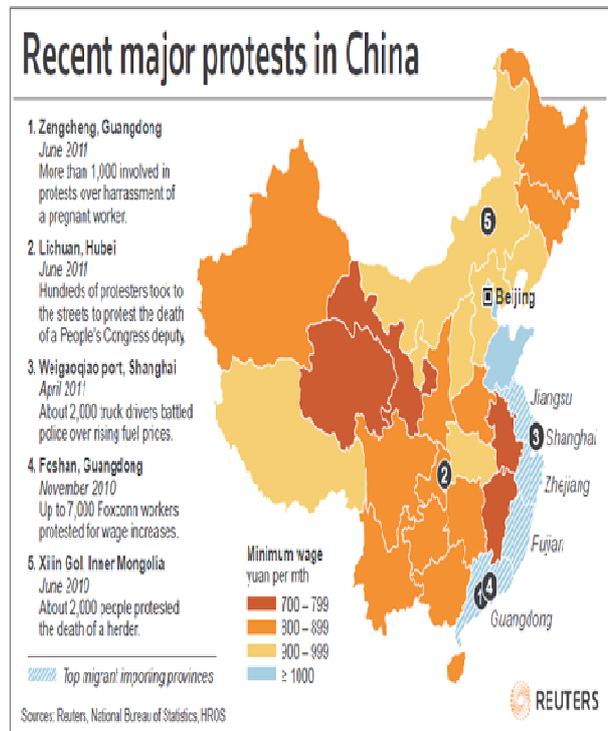


Figure 6: Areas of recent major protests in China Demands of young migrants (Buckley and Pomfret 2011: 3)



University sociologist (Meyers 2011: 7). While this total includes other disgruntled sections of society as well, migrant labourers constitute a major component. Recent demonstrations in Zengcheng, Guangdong and Hubei provinces reflect the violence, with migrant labourers defying officials and attacking government offices and public property. A recent incident in Guangdong Province saw hundreds of migrant workers clashing with security officials, when a pregnant migrant worker was assaulted by them. Many such incidents are taking place throughout China over issues related to unpaid wages, death of migrants in police custody, and so on.

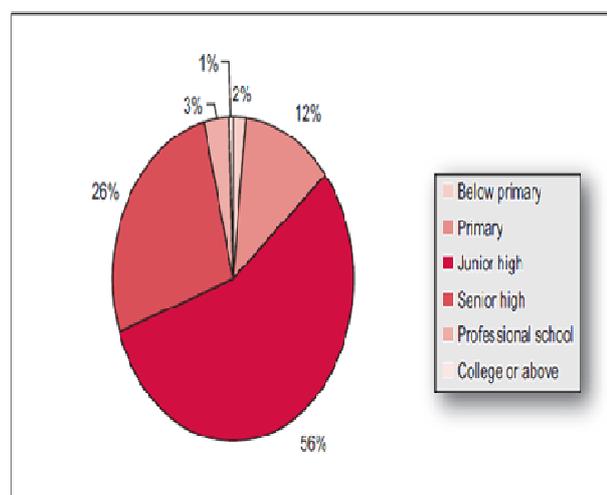
### III REFORMS AND PROBLEMS

The government at the central level and at provincial levels have started many reforms especially in the *hukou* system to subdue the

growing dissent. However, the *hukou* reforms were mainly controlled by the local governments. Many local governments tried to introduce some reforms for migrant workers like the introduction of a new type of urban *hukou* called “self supplied food grain”. People could apply for this *hukou* only if they fulfilled certain requirements laid down by the respective governments which ranged from having an accommodation of their own, running a business to working in an enterprise plus they will have to make arrangements for their own food grain. This *hukou* was a mere symbolic change and was not at par with *nongzhuanfei* and does not qualify them to enjoy state benefits plus they could not take this *hukou* to areas higher in the administrative ladder. This programme was terminated in the 1990’s. Another programme was started by some local governments in the late 1980’s where urban citizenship was sold to the rural population. Though the central government opposed this policy they finally succumbed to the pressure and endorsed the “locally valid” urban *hukou* in 1992. Popularly known as the “blue stamp” urban *hukou* it differed from the formal urban *hukou* which uses a red stamp. Unlike the “self supplied food grain” it covered many big cities like Shanghai and their eligibility criterion was calculated on the basis of contributions of a person towards the city. The glitch being that the contributions were calculated on the basis of dollar investment, high education, or skill which qualified a handful of rural people to qualify for it.

The other problem is that different provincial governments formulate different parameters for the eligibility and even within the same province the criterion is different. The central had left it to the locals following the principle “local need, local benefit, local responsibility, local validity” (Buckley 2011: 836). They also supported these policies as they only legalised this group but it did not

Figure 7: Distribution of rural migrant workers by educational attainment, 2007 (Shi 2010: 13)



get *nongzhuanfei* thus, saving the central government from any fiscal burdens. This *hukou* also required the applicants to pay an urban entry fee depending on the city they are applying to. This fees charged in lieu of the “urban infrastructural construction” was as high as USD8000 in some cases, thus limiting the applicants to investors, buyers of property, and professionals. Even after paying such a huge amount they cannot use their *hukou* status outside the boundary of their cities as they have still not undertaken the *nongzhuanfei* and thus, are not urban citizens according to the central government. Even the grant of political rights is left to the local government to decide and in practice they are promised a full conversion after serving several years as good citizens. All this leaves a lot to the local governments’ credibility that used this as a means of earning monetarily with local officials selling *hukou*.

But these reforms have failed due to the inherent problems in the conditions that have been laid down for the grant of these types of *Hukou*’s which do not grant a full urban citizenship to people and also the rural migrant labourers were not benefitted by it as they could hardly meet the qualifications.

The corruption among the officials and the sale of urban hukou seen as a lucrative area to earn money by the local authorities has further heightened the suspicions and angst of the rural migrants.

In 1997 the State Council approved a 'pilot project' in 450 towns and small cities on the recommendation of MPS to grant 'urban hukou' to "qualified" rural hukou holders. Under this policy all those who have been staying in these towns and cities for more than two years and have either a stable job or a stable place of accommodation are eligible for applying. The applicants should be working in either secondary or tertiary sector or be in management or tertiary sector. They should also possess their own apartments. The government expanded this programme from 450 towns and small cities to all towns and cities in 2001. The State Council however did not specify the value of the property or how much income a person should have to qualify for this scheme which again gave respective local governments to specify them according to their discretion.

Cities like Nanjing fixed that a family of three of a migrant worker needs to own a 60m<sup>2</sup> apartment while in Wuxi, a migrant must own a 100m<sup>2</sup> apartment or must have paid 100,000 Yuan as taxes for two consecutive years. Thus, technically majority of migrant

Figure 8: Approximate Hukou Rates in 1994 (Chan and Zhang: 838)

Prefectural-level cities	More than 10,000 Yuan
County-level cities	5000-10,000 Yuan
Cities and towns below county level	2000-5,000 Yuan

workers could not apply for it and remained temporary citizens without the social benefits (Refer to Fig 7 and 8). In some provinces the programme has seen some success. For example in Chengdu became a pilot area in 2007 and has spent a huge amount to build its infrastructure to provide benefits to the migrant workers who will be granted urban *hukou's* under the scheme. It realised to integrate the new population it needs to work on establishing schools, healthcare insurance etc for its citizens. Over the last three years it has spend 900 million Yuan on constructing schools and raising salaries for the teachers (Pumin 2011: 23).

Last year Guangdong also started a scoring system which would enable a migrant to become an urban citizen. The points could be earned on the basis of educational background, skill level, and participation in community services and so on. The main catch in this scheme was that the peasants had to give up their lands in lieu of urban *hukou*. This stopped many peasants from applying for urban *hukou's* and this was also seen as a move by the government to grab lands. Plus, the scoring system again brings the same issue of discrepancies and leaves things arbitration of the local officials.

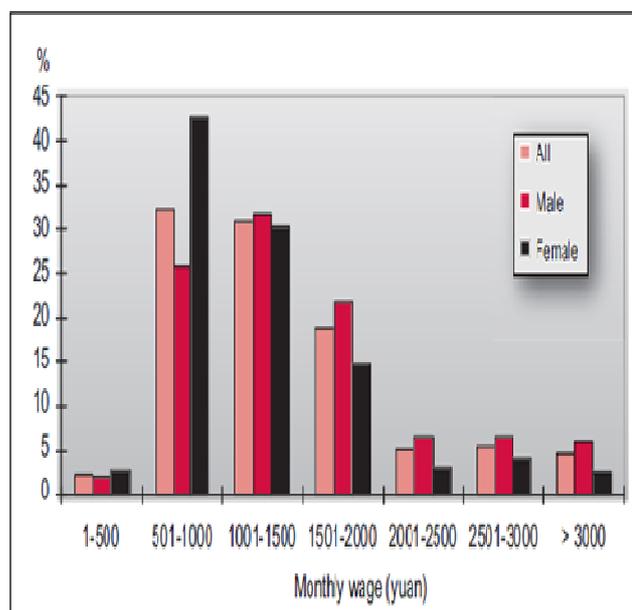
In 2001 the National Development and Reform Commission and the Ministry of Finance notified the local authorities to abolish all fees and simplify the procedures for temporary residency permits. This measure however, was not enforced in many cities up till 2007 (Shi 2010: 7). Then the central government promoted training programmes for the rural migrants so that they can get a better job.

The costs for such trainings were shared by the central government and the provincial governments. Under this scheme "Sunshine Project" was launched in 2004 to start training the rural migrants however, by the

example of Sichuan province we examine that the subsidy provided by the governments was not much. In 2004 it was 150 Yuan, 160 Yuan in 2005, 190 Yuan in 2006 and 300 Yuan in 2007 (Shi 2010: 7). Under the promulgation of the “Opinion on stepping up the management and services for the floating population” (a taskforce) the migrants were given the recognition as ‘workers’ rather than peasants. The All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) also issued circular urging local trade unions to allow migrants to join. In response to this Shenyang founded China’s first regional trade union in Luyuan. By 2007 they initiated a programme to provide legal protection and social services to them outside their hometown. But having assets of only USD250, RMB equivalent it didn’t qualify because it could therefore not make the mandatory two percent contributions to total pay as stipulated by ACFTU at the enterprise level. Thus, the regional trade unions also require financial assistance from the enterprises and government. The government has also initiated reforms to recover the wages in arrears of the migrant labourers. The Supreme Court issued a circular to local courts as early as 2004 to speed up the process but still unpaid wages remain a huge issue with migrant workers. Many recent outbursts have been due to unpaid wages.

The central government and the local governments hand needs to invest heavily on “urbanizing” migrants, spending an estimated US\$ 12,340 for each migrant according to a government think tank (Meyers 2011: 4). The government at both levels are trying to escape this expenditure and instead of granting a full urban *hukou* to the migrants. They have started schemes to legalize them and to a certain extent have initiated reforms for the migrant labourers. However, the central government has delegated administrative and fiscal

Figure 9: Monthly Wage Profile of Rural Migrant Workers, 2007 (Shi 2010: 14)



responsibilities to the provincial government and even the *hukou* laws and conversions are left to them. The provincial governments have further delegated their authority which leads to a tricky situation and the most important problem lies here. Different provincial governments interpret the same law differently and according to their own convenience. The reforms are moulded to suit their needs if the area needs more migrant workers they will frame policies favouring them and vice versa. The rising corruption among the party cadres and officials further prolongs and sometimes ends the aspirations of migrants of an urban *hukou*. The never-ending problems that the migrants face, leads to the registration of a number of complaints with the local authorities. There is also a separate department called the Offices of Letters and Calls that is attached to all the departments at all levels of government where citizens can register their complaints against corrupt officials. If their complaints are not addressed they can appeal directly to Beijing. The local officials have appointed interceptors to stop people from registering

their complaints at Beijing fearing dents in their careers.

The work of an interceptor is to stop complains from reaching Beijing via coercion or bribes. The local government is also trying to divide and rule the worker community by rewarding informers with residence permits and cash prizes. Since these benefit a small percentage, the majority are invariably punished after being informed on and get further alienated being pre-emptively punished for having grievances, which leaves no alternative but recourse to violence. This creates further unrest and deepens existing social fissures. There is a strong undercurrent among the workers against not only discrimination but also rampant corruption in the local authorities, where they are asked for bribes by the local officials for redressal of their grievances.

The failure of these reforms has given rise to a new pattern of rioting wherein the government property and officials are targeted. These incidents of 'mass rioting' are, however, spontaneous and explode for a few days centring on specific grievances. Thus, they are localised and do not ignite the whole country. According to recent news reports neighbouring towns on receiving news of such rioting have broken out into sympathetic rioting with local migrants ready to join in and fight for causes not directly related to them.

What the government does not recognize is the fact that instead of breaking the solidarity of the migrant labourers, they should be aiming to address the valid grievances of this section of society as a whole and not appease individuals. Also the government should focus on enhancing its redressal system by controlling corruption among the cadre so that voices are heard

early and dealt with in time preventing spasmodic flare-ups. The local government and the Central government need to proactively tackle this issue before these unorganized and local protests from turn into a national phenomenon and further add to the worries of CPC pertaining to social instability in China.

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