

# MORE THAN HALF MEASURES NEEDED ON MIGRANTS

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Following publication of Institutionalized Exclusion, the Chinese government issued a directive on rural migrants addressing concerns that have been raised. Nicolas Becquelin examines the significance of the directive and its likely ramifications.

In early January, the Chinese State Council issued a circular calling for the abolition of discriminatory policies against rural migrants working in the cities, and urged the authorities to “protect their rights and interests.” The announcement has been greeted with unbridled enthusiasm in both the domestic and foreign media, where it has been interpreted as signaling a dismantlement of the *hukou* system.

In other quarters the Chinese government’s move has been dismissed as little more than an orchestrated public relations tactic before the Spring Festival - a time when social tensions are traditionally high - aimed at demonstrating Party Secretary Hu Jintao’s concern for the country’s underprivileged.

Both arguments overlook the crucial fact that migration is no longer controlled by the central government, but rather is in the hands of local municipalities.

The numbers speak for themselves. Internal migration in China involves millions of people across the country: 120 million former rural residents have left the countryside since the launch of Deng Xiaoping’s reforms; 150 million are currently on the move; and the government estimates that between now and 2010, 13 million new migrants will settle in the cities every year.

Over the past 20 years, the contribution of migrant workers to China’s development has not been confined to the physical construction of the impressive skylines of the coastal cities and provincial capitals. More importantly, the remittances they regularly send back to their families have become the only financial lifeline for a direly neglected countryside population that would otherwise be unable to pay for school fees, health expenses, construction of better housing and the flurry of taxes levied by local officials.

Despite this, migrant workers still constitute one of the most disadvantaged and discriminated groups in China,

performing menial, hard and dangerous jobs for a pittance, or working in exploitative conditions in the coastal manufacturing belt, while being denied access to those basic services such as education, subsidized housing and healthcare.

On paper, the government initiative looks like a radical change over the past practice of treating the “floating population” as a public order issue, and a strong signal in favor of easing the entrance of migrants to the cities, as well as guaranteeing that migrant workers enjoy an equal status to urbanites. But in reality the government has issued nothing more than a non-binding “circular” that only recommends a course of action.

At the root of this decision is the recognition that urbanization is a make-or-break issue for China’s future. Already, China has an official surplus of 170 million laborers in the countryside. The impact of WTO accession is expected to exacerbate this trend. China has committed itself to a number of measures over the next three to five years – such as the reduction of import tariffs on agricultural products, the capping of state subsidies, and the elimination of export subsidies for agricultural products – that will push millions of farm laborers out of work.

Now the question is: Will there be enough jobs for them in the cities?

A recent study by the State Statistical Bureau found that large numbers of migrants were returning to their rural homes because of the difficulty of finding jobs and settling in urban areas. The study found that on average about 60 percent of the farmers who go to the city to look for work return without having found a job. The Bureau warned that this phenomenon represented a “grave challenge” to China’s economic development.

Despite the language employed in the new directive, the central government’s concerns have much more to do with expanding the urban labor markets to meet the rural-urban shift of the workforce than with ensuring that migrant workers’ rights are protected. Freedom of association, collective bargaining and the abolition of discriminatory measures are still far off the agenda of Beijing officials.

Until now little attention has been paid to the obstacles of implementing even this unbinding circular, yet they are formidable.



Photo: Sinopix.

Just consider the problem of unpaid wages of migrant workers, which has sparked many public protests. The State Council circular is only the latest in a long series of measures attempting to address this issue over the years, but to little avail. In the month of January alone, a nationwide enquiry reported 13,000 cases involving 626,000 workers owed a total of 350 million yuan in unpaid wages. In Guangdong alone, the Labor Ministry estimates that the yearly amount totals over 400 million yuan.

The fundamental point is that by continually refusing migrants the right to organize themselves to defend their legitimate interests, the central government has virtually nullified the possibility that its policy changes can actually be enforced at the local level, except in showcase examples or in cities under close central government control.

Localities are well aware that a surge in the number of migrants benefiting from the same privileges as their urban residents will place an onerous burden on their budgets. Welfare expenditures (education, healthcare and social security) already represent a heavy yoke for smaller municipalities, who will be loath to add new categories of beneficiaries.

In addition, intense competition between localities will discourage them from implementing “generous” measures that might drain their budgets and hinder their ability to attract investment. Paradoxically, those localities offering better conditions for migrants – and who are stricter in enforcing work and safety regulations – are likely to be at a disadvantage compared to those with looser standards.

The unholy alliance between local authorities and entrepreneurs clearly favors maintaining a vast and pliable work force. Since many workers do not technically have the

right to stay in the cities, they are in no position to take action to defend their rights, resulting in the massive problem of unpaid wages.

Increasingly lax regulations that have emerged at the local level aim at attracting “high quality” migrants to cities, while shutting out and expelling poor and disadvantaged migrants through “clean up” campaigns that often involve extensive violence, including arbitrary detention and forced evictions, the extent of which cannot be underestimated.

Internal statistics show that all across China, the number of people detained and repatriated, most of the time in appalling and degrading conditions, has recently surged to more than 3 million cases a year, a three-fold increase over the 1990 figure. The authorities recognize that migrant workers compose the “vast majority” of those who are detained. And this might be only the tip of the iceberg. The number of “repatriation centers” managed jointly by the Public Security and the Civil Affairs departments has rocketed to over 800, from 650 in 1990.

Preparations to “cleanse” Beijing of its “undesirable” population, mainly wage-earning migrants, were carried out in advance of National People’s Congress session in March. The Public Security Bureau has already announced that the 2008 Olympics will bring “even higher demands for the management of the city,” and has stepped up the policy of clearing out unemployed migrants, citing an increase in the crime rate due to their presence.

Scraping the institutionalized discrimination of migrants will not be achieved through piecemeal measures such as those outlined in the new directive. The only solution is the full abolition of the hukou system and allowing migrants to organize independently to defend their rights.