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# China. "Good news" for workers cannot hide harsh reality

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The New Year has already seen a number of announcements in the official Chinese media that seem, on the surface at least, to be good news for workers. Coal mine accidents are down, graduate employment is up, and the authorities in the central province of Hubei have launched a wide-ranging crackdown on forced labour. Of course, the reality behind these "good news" stories is not quite so laudable.

The official figures for accidents and deaths in China's coal mines, announced on 19 January, both fell by nearly 20 percent last year, continuing the steady decline of the last four years. But this still left 2,631 miners dead in 2009, seven deaths every day, with many more unreported. One reason for the decline in numbers was last year's campaign in Shanxi to close small private mines and merge the more productive ones with large state-owned mines. However there is now a real danger that the ever growing demand for coal in China will push these state-owned mines to increase production beyond safe limits.

The China Daily reported on 23 January that the official employment rate for new graduates had shot up to 87 percent at the end of 2009. What these figures do not say however is that the vast majority of graduates can only get jobs that pay little more than those of factory workers who left school aged 15. Graduates often have no choice but to take on internships that provide minimal training for little or no pay, no benefits and no protection under labour law, and no guarantee of future employment.

On January 25, the Wuhan Evening News announced that, following the murder of a worker at a rural brick factory, the local authorities had launched a successful campaign to "rectify illegal employment and crackdown on criminal behaviour." The same day, Shanghai-based Dragon TV reported that mentally handicapped people were still being forced to work at brick factories in Hubei for just 208 yuan a year - less than the weekly minimum wage in Shenzhen.

The mayor of Shanghai has stated that this year his administration will ensure that all migrant children in the city get a compulsory education within the public school system. And two civil rights activists in Beijing have urged the municipal authorities there to follow suit and accept the children of migrant workers into city's kindergartens. However, an official in Beijing's Chaoyang district, which plans to demolish about 20 private migrant schools this month, was less accommodating: "All of these affected schools are not approved and are not equipped for educating children. We encourage the parents to send their children back to their hometowns, because there, education is free and the quality of education is high," he told Kyodo News on 29 January.

Finally, as we noted in last month's e-bulletin, official publications are calling on the government to offer firmer support to workers and crackdown on companies that use the global economic crisis as an excuse for not paying employees their wages, overtime and other benefits. This "pro-worker" stance was again evident in the coverage of the 15 January strike at the Taiwanese-owned Wintek plant in Suzhou, with a commentary on China.com calling for the end to the "inhumane treatment of workers." It should be noted however that this particular commentary was just as much anti-Taiwan as it was pro-worker.

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