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## Chinese factory workers begin protesting low wages, poor conditions

By Tim Johnson

DONGGUAN, **China** -- A large number of migrant workers in the region known as the "world's factory" are getting fed up with their low-paid jobs and are shucking the assembly line, creating a significant labor shortage.

It's an unusual, and somewhat startling, occurrence in a nation with an excess of workers.

The Pearl River Delta became the fastest-growing region in the world over the past quarter-century as peasants, unchained from their collective farms, migrated to the delta's factories. Guangdong province, which surrounds the Pearl River Delta, saw its economic output soar 64-fold over the past quarter-century. For anyone observing, it was like a high-speed video of a region rising.

But some of the 30 million or so migrant workers providing the Pearl River Delta with its industrial muscle say they haven't shared in the bounty. While industrialists earn buckets of cash, joining gated country clubs and gambling away fortunes on junkets to the nearby casino mecca of Macao, wages for migrant workers over the past decade haven't grown at all, workplace economists say.

Earlier this year, some factories found the pool of job applicants drying up. Exacerbating the situation, many workers who went home for the Chinese New Year holiday never came back. Some estimates now put the labor shortage in Guangdong province at up to 2 million workers. In cities such as Dongguan, 60 percent of factories need laborers. Banners stream over factory entrances, promising that the companies won't default on wages, as they have in the past, or that they're improving work conditions.

The labor situation in southeastern **China** is worth watching for reasons far beyond the economy. Workers have few ways to voice dissatisfaction in **China**. They can't form independent labor unions. So worker discontent is one of the many wildfires around the pillars of Communist Party rule after more than five decades in power.

Experts pinpoint a number of factors for the sudden shortage of laborers in small- and medium-sized factories.

Among the obvious reasons are that workers have grown weary of forced overtime, wages of \$ 50 a month, rampant workplace injury, disregard for labor law and frequent nonpayment.

Another possible explanation of the shortage is that migrants have sent word home about abuses in the Pearl River Delta region.

Liu Kaiming, the head of the Institute of Contemporary Observation, a nonprofit group in nearby Shenzhen that monitors workplace issues, said researchers of the Dongguan Communist Party Committee found in a survey this year that 100 of some 300 local factories questioned had defaulted on wages to workers. Moreover, 60 percent of workers in Dongguan must toil an average of 120 hours of overtime per month (or about 30 hours a week), he said.

A less obvious reason for the shortage, perhaps, is the coming of age of a more independent-minded generation of young workers born since 1979, when **China** began a family planning policy that limited urban couples to one child and most rural ones to two.

"They've grown kind of picky about their jobs. They haven't gone through the hardships that their parents did," Liu said.

"There's been a lack of evaluation of the consequences of the one-child policy," echoed Yang Sen, a manager of a Taiwan-owned factory that makes chargers for cellular phones, who added that parents with a sole offspring often don't want them in a bone-wearying job at an assembly plant. Some are keeping them in school longer, he added, hoping they can obtain more skilled work.

Another factor is the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, or SARS, epidemic that spread from Guangdong in late 2002 and eventually killed 800 people worldwide. The outbreak spooked parents of migrant laborers.

Along the alleys of this city, the third-largest export hub of **China**, labor discontent is evident.

Outside the Esteem Industries electric-fan factory, about three dozen workers quickly swarm a visitor inquiring about conditions.

"By October, 50 percent of us will leave here," said Tang Hua, a 23-year-old with dyed spiky blond hair. He said as many as 16 workers are crowded into each room in the dormitory provided by the factory. Guards barred a photographer from entering.

"The food is terrible and it is not clean. That is the main reason we want to stop working here," said Li Tianxin, a migrant who came from Hunan province.

"They just give us turnips and bean curd," piped in Wang Shaohuan, adding that meat and hygiene have disappeared from the company meal plan.

Many of the 8,000 or so workers at the factory say they make less than the \$ 55 a month required by local labor legislation.

"According to labor law, we should be paid more. But the factories don't follow the law," said Zhou Deqing, 26.

Even with wages of only \$ 50 a month, the factory workers still earn far more than the average

farmer, who ekes out a living on \$ 320 a year, official statistics show. Farmers are also hobbled by a near-total lack of public health care, the diminishing size of rural plots and a heavy tax burden that only recently has begun to drop.

But migrant factory workers haven't enjoyed the rising standards of living of other urban residents, who've seen incomes increase an average of 8 percent each year during the past 10 years. Per capita urban incomes now average \$ 1,020 a year.

The manager of the largest private employment agency in the city, Yang Qi of Chitong jobs market, said factory owners insist on paring wages to the bone to maintain global competitiveness. Local city inspectors turn a blind eye to abuses.

He said, however, that the labor shortage is distressing city officials in Dongguan, which has a population of some 10 million people. City officials sent out a circular in March asking industrialists to come up with ways to attract more migrants.

"These migrant workers are demanding more in terms of their working and living conditions," Yang said. "If they (factory owners) do not raise wages, they won't get any workers at all."

Factory owners and city officials have even considered importing laborers from neighboring Vietnam, Yang said, although such a plan may never take shape.

Some larger companies are recruiting far afield.

"In the past, everyone came here. If we wanted people, there were lined up outside. Now we need to go to other places that are poorer to get workers," said Yang Sen, the Taiwanese businessman who's also vice president of the Taiwan Businessmen's Association in Dongguan, which represents some 4,000 factories.

Companies like his are going as far as the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, nearly 1,000 miles to the northwest, to find workers.

The company invited a Ningxia broadcasting company to send a television crew to report on "the life and working conditions" at the local plants, he said, to ease fears of poor conditions.

In March, Premier Wen Jiabao announced a change in agricultural policy that also may have contributed to the urban labor shortage. Wen announced the lifting of a series of taxes on farmers in a move to make their lives less harsh.

"The peasants think tending the fields is not as bad as working in the factories now. That's why they don't want to come," said Annie Su, the vice president of the human resources management committee of the Tangxia district of Dongguan.

Grain prices are now rising in the countryside, pushing up rural incomes.

City and provincial officials declined to talk about the labor shortage.

"They worry that if they admit it, it will have a bad effect on the investment environment," said Liu, the workplace specialist.

Experts say large factories that supply consumer goods to U.S. and European companies often pay slightly higher wages. The major labor problems are among smaller factories, usually owned by Hong Kong, Taiwanese or mainland business owners.

Some see the labor shortages as salutary for workers.

"It is good. It will force these companies to improve their working environment and payment," said Zhang Youhuai, a management expert at the Guangdong Academy of Social Sciences.

In lectures to factory managers, Zhang said he encourages them to treat workers better, comparing the workplace "to a big ship. ... The workers are the crew. If you want the ship to go fast and in the right direction, you have to be nice to the crew."