



Over-worked and under-paid

The long-running battle of China's teachers for decent work

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Cover photograph: Thousands of teachers protest outside the Shangzhi government headquarters in November 2014.

Foreword by Eugenia Kemble

For many of us outside of China, the only insight we have into that country's education system is the remarkable success story of Shanghai; a city whose students outperform everyone in the world in mathematics, reading and science.

Shanghai however is not China. The real picture is much more complicated and difficult to discern. But now, thanks to China Labour Bulletin's new research report, *Over-worked and under-paid: The long-running battle of China's teachers for decent work*, we can get a sobering peek at what is really happening behind the scenes in places where teacher unhappiness has spilled over into protests, demonstrations, and even the occasional strike.

We cannot know for sure that the report's findings about teacher pay and working conditions are typical. But the surging accounts of teacher actions against their localities and school administrators across the country suggest they are reacting to a pervasive reality. CLB's startling "strike and protest" map from 2014-15 shows as many as 168 incidents in practically every part of the country. They include participants across all levels of education service from preschool teachers to the university. Since their numbers include only those reported in the media or on social media, and since teachers have been threatened with jailing if they openly discuss job actions with the media, we believe the true picture known to Chinese officialdom must be much more alarming.

Teachers are rejecting the basic conditions that define their jobs – low pay, pay delays, lack of benefits like social security, poor working conditions and particularly the second class pay and bad treatment of rural "community teachers" who, despite lesser qualifications, were nevertheless hired to do full scale jobs.

What the report presents is a compelling portrait of swelling teacher anger and frustration in a country whose economy is weakening, whose middle class is trying to come to grips with a lowering quality of life, and whose government has decided that the way to deal with its insecurity about protest is to crack down – detain protest leaders, arrest their lawyers, and intimidate the non-governmental organizations that may be trying to help them.

In alienating its teachers, the regime is playing with fire. In November 2014 a teacher strike in the north-eastern city of Zhaodong grew from a few hundred and spread to neighbouring cities.

Within a week it involved over 20,000 teachers. Such an outpouring of anger is not just about job dissatisfaction. It's not just about this or that employer. It's about hostility toward government. And, its speed and scope have to be unnerving to those in power, whether in Zhaodong or a host of other places where teachers' working conditions are at issue.

The smart thing for China to do, and as CLB recommends, is implement its own collective bargaining law. The official Chinese representative of teachers – indeed, of all workers – is the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). The ACFTU bears no resemblance to the independent and democratic unions we have in western democracies. Its role is to rubber stamp Communist Party rules and policy. Yet, it works hard to claim representative legitimacy as a “union,” even though its leadership is not elected, it does not engage in collective bargaining and it does not look out for workers’ due process rights. To a large degree then, teachers’ strikes and protests are actually aimed at the ACFTU because the ACFTU has failed them.

Authorities and the ACFTU take note. When teachers are the source of unrest, the danger to those in power is more profound than for other workers, at least in part because they are also the engines of the nation’s chief source of propaganda, the public schools. Teachers are more educated and they are better equipped to organize. So, a smart Chinese regime would make way for genuine collective bargaining for teachers, led by teacher organizations whose leaders are truly elected. We won’t hold our breath.

Hopefully, with this new CLB report, the world will begin to pay closer attention to the plight of Chinese teachers. Importantly, the report, which focuses on the desperate conditions of average teachers in China, can help round out the picture skewed by an obsession with the success of Shanghai. Let it be the first of many more attempts to tell us what is really happening to those who teach China’s next generations. We can only hope it will reach deep enough into the Chinese regime to find a critical mass of leaders to take its advice.

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Introduction

In November 2014, hundreds of teachers in the north-eastern city of Zhaodong staged a strike over low pay and pension payments. Within a week, thousands of teachers across Zhaodong, and an estimated 20,000 teachers in three other nearby cities, had joined the strike demanding that the provincial government address their long-standing grievances.¹

The strikes made international headlines and were portrayed as relatively rare incidents of worker unrest in China's teaching profession. China's teachers are, however, far from reluctant to take collective action; the rarity of their protests stems simply from the fact that they make up a very small proportion, less than two percent, of China's overall working population. The evidence suggests that teachers are actually more likely than factory workers to take industrial action: They are willing and able to stand up for their legal rights and benefits, they can organize quickly and on a massive scale, and have continually resisted attempts by local governments and school administrators to erode their pay and benefits.

Teachers in China do not have an overtly political agenda; their collective actions are specifically aimed at winning much-needed improvements in pay and working conditions or in defending existing benefits that are under threat. However, because teachers are public sector workers or at least under the administrative remit of the local education department, their actions have a much more immediate impact on local governments than a strike at a privately owned garment factory, for example. Moreover, many teacher strikes and protests are directly related to changes in government policy and regulations and therefore can be seen as more of a challenge to the authorities.

Teachers' strikes and collective protests have featured strongly in many of China Labour Bulletin's research reports on the workers' movement in China.² This new report seeks to broaden the analysis by examining the deep-seated and long-standing problems in China's schools and the lack

¹ Tom Mitchell, "[China teacher strikes hit three more cities](#)," *Financial Times*, 28 November 2014.

² See CLB's research reports: [Searching for the Union: The Workers' Movement in China 2011-13](#), and [Going it Alone: The Workers' Movement in China \(2007-2008\)](#).

of any effective dispute resolution mechanism within that school system, which has left many teachers with no option but to take collective action in order to defend their interests.

The first chapter examines the development of the teaching industry in China during the reform era and how the country has struggled to provide all school-age children with nine years of compulsory education. It also examines the widely varying working conditions, pay and benefits of teachers in different regions of China today.

The second chapter looks at the vast gap between teachers in China's cities and those in remote regions of the Chinese countryside. It comprises two detailed case studies examining the pay and working conditions for teachers in urban Guangdong and the long-standing struggle of so-called community teachers in rural Jiangxi.

The third chapter is a detailed analysis of teachers' strikes and protests in China during 2014 and 2015, based on data from China Labour Bulletin's Strike Map. It examines the key issues that gave rise to teachers' protests, specifically, low pay, social insurance, equal pay for equal work and wage arrears, and shows how protests have spread across all sections of the profession from pre-school teachers to university staff.

In the conclusion, China Labour Bulletin makes a series of recommendations for the Chinese government, which are designed to improve the pay and working conditions of China's teachers and establish a mechanism by which disputes between teaching staff, school administrators and government officials can be effectively resolved.

Background

The development and reform of teaching in China

It is widely assumed that teachers in China have a relatively high-social status and are well-respected by the public. But while many people in China do see teaching as a noble and valuable profession,³ this high-regard is not always reflected in the pay and working conditions of ordinary school teachers.

Following the chaos and tumult of the Cultural Revolution, a decade in which many teachers were vilified and persecuted, China sought to rebuild its education system. The college entrance examination was reintroduced in 1977, and in 1986 the government established a nine-year compulsory education system, which was supposed to guarantee six years of primary school and three years of secondary school education for all Chinese children free of charge.

The immediate problem for the government was that there were simply not enough teachers in the state system, especially in rural areas, to provide an education for all school-age children. In order to make up the short-fall, local governments began recruiting under-qualified staff, known as community teachers (民办教师) who were seen as a cheaper more flexible alternative to state teachers (公办教师). Community teachers were usually poorly paid, had no benefits and little job security but their numbers grew so rapidly that they soon became the backbone of the rural education system in China. This two-tier system has been the source of long-running tension in China's schools, and despite numerous attempts by the central government to absorb community teachers into the state system, local governments vigorously resisted and many community teacher disputes remain unresolved even today.

The *Teachers Law* of 1993 established a national framework for the employment of teachers in China. The *Teachers Law* states that teachers should have basically the same pay and benefits as civil servants of a comparable grade. But once again, the local governments which pay teachers' salaries resisted, and teachers' pay has rarely, if ever, reached the same level as civil servants. One study of teachers' pay found that from 1990 to 2010, primary and middle school teachers'

³ Peter Dolton, "[Why do some countries respect their teachers more than others?](#)" *The Guardian*, 3 October 2013.

pay was not only lower than the average pay of civil servants but was also lower than the national average for all professions.⁴ The failure to implement the provisions of the *Teachers Law* led to widespread strikes and protests by teachers in 2008, which eventually forced the government to revise its pay policies.

The response of the government was to gradually introduce a performance pay system in high schools and middle schools. This did help reduce the pay gap in some cases but also created a raft of other problems stemming from the abuse of the system by school administrators. There were numerous strikes and protests by teachers in the early 2010s over the performance pay system, with teachers complaining that their basic pay had been cut back dramatically and that the award of performance pay was entirely at the discretion of school administrators.⁵

Employment of teachers in China

There are around 13.5 million full-time teachers in China, according to official figures. For the year 2014, the *China Statistical Yearbook* recorded 1.8 million preschool teachers, 5.7 million in primary school, 3.5 million middle school teachers, and 2.5 million academic and vocational high school teachers. The numbers of both primary and middle school teachers have declined over the last decade due to low birth rates and subsequently declining student enrolment, particularly in urban areas. Increasing demand from middle-class and working parents for kindergarten education on the other hand has led to a rapid rise in the number of preschool teachers in China. According to official statistics, the number of preschools jumped from just 138,200 in 2009 to 209,900 in 2014,⁶ with much of the increase driven by the private sector. These figures, however, almost certainly exclude informal day care centres and unregistered kindergartens for migrant workers' children. At the other end of the schooling continuum, many more students are continuing their education beyond middle school and as such there has also been an increase in the demand for high school teachers.

⁴ Jiang Jinqiu, Du Yuhong (姜金秋, 杜育红). “[我国中小学教师工资水平分析\(1990～2010年\)](#)” (“An analysis of the wage levels of China's middle and primary school teachers (1990-2010)”), [中国社会科学网\(CSSN.cn\)](#), 17 Oct. 2013.

⁵ See section on teachers (pp.27-29) in CLB's research report, [Searching for the Union: The workers' movement in China 2011-13](#).

⁶ “[我国幼儿园市场格局散乱，民办幼儿园将成为推动我国幼教行业增长的核心动力](#)” (“Chaotic patterns in China's preschool market, private preschools will become the central driving force in the growth of China's preschool education”) [中国产业信息\(CHYXX.com\)](#), 17 Nov. 2015.

In terms of teacher training, it is important to note that China's teaching colleges (师范大学) no longer focus solely on teaching degrees and many graduates do not go into the teaching profession.⁷ In the eastern province of Shandong, for example, only 30 percent of teaching college graduates went on to become teachers.⁸ As a result, many schools are struggling to recruit well-qualified and experienced teachers. There is a particularly severe shortage of well-qualified teachers in rural areas. A report on rural schools in Hunan found a chronic lack of mathematics and science teachers, with school administrators blaming the shortage squarely on the low pay and lack of benefits. Many school teachers have no formal teacher training. Teachers are often hired on the basis of an undergraduate diploma and given a few standardized tests in Chinese and their specialty subject. In some cases, teachers can start work even before undertaking the tests; with the understanding they will complete the certification process within five years. In many rural schools the situation is even worse, with many teachers only having completed a high school or middle school education. One study found that around a third of all rural teachers surveyed only had a high school level education.

Pay and working conditions

Teachers in the state system receive a basic salary, performance pay, benefits, bonuses and subsidies.⁹ (*See chart below*). The basic wage can be broken into two parts, a pay grade and seniority pay. Pay grades are advanced through years of experience and responsibility; for example, primary school teachers have basic, intermediate, advanced and superior levels. However, advancement criteria are vague and effectively determined by individual schools and their administrations. For example, while some new teachers may be able to advance to the "intermediate" level after a few years, other teachers may remain at the "basic" level for many years.

⁷ Han Xiaorong, Xu Diwei (韩晓蓉 徐笛薇). “[中国每年 40 万师范生过剩，中小学新招教师 1/4 非师范毕业](#)” (“400,000 Excess Graduates Each Year From China's Teaching Colleges, But One Quarter of Primary and Middle School Teachers Are Not Teaching College Graduates.”) [澎湃新闻 \(The Paper\)](#), 14 Oct. 2015.

⁸ “[就业难当老师更难，师范生就业七成转行](#)” (“Getting a job is hard, being a teacher is harder, 70% of teaching college graduates change careers”) [半岛都市报 \(Bandao.cn\)](#), 6 Nov. 2015.

⁹ “[2015 教师工资福利](#)” (“2015 Teacher Wages and Benefits”) [应届毕业生 \(YJBYS.com\)](#), 7 April 2015.

Performance-based pay was introduced to help address low pay among teachers; however, vague standards and the arbitrary enforcement of those standards by individual schools and regional governments has meant many teachers have not seen any real wage increases since the policy was introduced. There are also large differences in social insurance coverage among China's teachers. While teachers on the government payroll may enjoy the five legally mandated social insurances (pension, health, unemployment, work-injury and maternity) plus housing fund contributions, most teachers in private schools will have limited social insurance benefits. Many teachers have a number of small subsidies, such as high-temperature subsidies, included in their pay package, while rural teachers are entitled to a token rural area subsidy.

Teachers' Remuneration			
<i>Basic Wages</i>	<i>Performance Pay</i>	<i>Social Insurance Benefits</i>	<i>Bonuses and Subsidies</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay grade • Seniority pay 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class load • Annual bonus • Determined by administration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pension, Unemployment, Medical, Work-related injury, Maternity insurances • Housing fund 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural area subsidy • High temperature subsidy • Other subsidies

Some of the worst conditions for teachers are in privately run preschools. In a survey of 131 preschool teachers in Shanghai, a third had either thought of quitting or had already quit their jobs, predominately because of low wages and intense work pressure.¹⁰ Moreover, many preschool teachers lack the social security benefits of regular state school teachers. Pay levels and workloads in vocational schools likewise vary greatly with teachers at privately-run schools usually hit the hardest. A teacher at a private vocational school in the southern factory town of Huizhou, for example, reportedly taught more than 20 classes a week, with large amounts of additional work outside of class.¹¹ His take home pay was around 4,000 yuan per month, just

¹⁰ “[2015 教师工资改革：幼儿园老师工资引关注](#)” (“2015 Teacher Wage Reform: Preschool teacher wages”) 中公教育(OFFCN), 19 April 2015.

¹¹ “[教师工资改革方案：民办中职拿什么留住优秀教师](#)” (“Teacher Wage Reform Plan: What Private Vocational Schools Use to Keep Superior Teachers”) 中公教师(OFFCN), 4 Dec. 2014.

enough for his family to survive. By contrast, a teacher in a state vocational school in Huizhou was paid 7,000 yuan a month basic salary plus an additional fee for every class taught above the 12 class weekly limit set by the school.

The huge gap in pay and working conditions for rural and urban teachers means that rural schools often struggle to hire and retain teaching staff, particularly in the fields of music, art, physical education and information technology. This in turn puts an additional work burden on those teachers that do stay: Some rural primary school teachers reportedly work more than 12 hours a day. The average salary of teachers in one rural county in Jilin was just 2,500 yuan a month, with only 40 percent of staff getting the social insurance coverage they were entitled to.¹² Rural teachers are entitled to rural area subsidies, but these are generally very low ranging from just 30 yuan to 200 yuan per month.¹³

Teachers' trade unions

The majority of state schools in China do have a trade union; however, the role of the union is highly restricted and curtailed by institutional failings. Schools and colleges in China, like hospitals, research facilities etc. are classified as public institutions (事业单位), and it is the job of the trade union within public institutions to act as a bridge between the Communist Party, management and staff, and ensure that smooth and harmonious labour relations are maintained. In reality, the trade union is merely an adjunct of management and does next to nothing in representing workers' interests or providing any services that might be useful to teaching staff or other school employees. Many teachers say they have no idea who their trade union representative is and that the union does little more than hand out token gifts during holidays. In privately-run schools, if there is a union at all, it will most likely be controlled by management, much in the same way that enterprise trade unions in factories are controlled.

Unlike the American Federation of Teachers or the National Union of Teachers in the United Kingdom, these public institution trade unions cannot represent teachers nationally or even at a

¹² “[扶助农村教师要做实](#)” (“Make Helping Rural Teachers a Reality”) *光明日报* (Guangming Daily), 30 April 2015.

¹³ Jia Yingchun (贺迎春). [董奇：农村教师职业缺乏吸引力导致教师流失](#) (Dong Qi: Unattractiveness of Rural Teaching Jobs Leads to Loss of Teachers), *人民网* (Peoples Net), 8 July 2015.

regional level. Even though government education policy directly affects teachers across the whole country, teachers have absolutely no voice or input into that policy through their union. Even at the local level, teachers are essentially powerless to influence policy because their trade union does not have the ability or even the will to represent their interests.

The result of this lack of trade union representation is that teachers are only able to react to new regulations and new policies *after* they have been announced by the local government or, more likely, *after* that new policy is implemented by individual school management. This imposition of policy inevitably creates tension in the workplace and simply increases the frustration teachers feel about their so-called trade union.

The urban–rural divide: Two case studies

The urban–rural divide is probably the most critical issue facing the teaching profession in China today. There is a tremendous gap between the pay and working conditions of teachers in a poor rural district and those in a prestigious high-school in a major city. Even state school teachers in a relatively small city can expect much better pay, social insurance and welfare benefits than teachers in nearby rural districts. Urban teachers, moreover, have better job security and long-term prospects for career advancement than teachers in small rural schools.

To illustrate the urban–rural divide, CLB interviewed three urban teachers in the economically developed southern province of Guangdong and a group of mainly retired community teachers in the poorer province of Jiangxi.

Location of CLB's teacher interviewees



Teachers in Zengcheng, Zhaoqing and Guangzhou

In October 2015, CLB interviewed three young teachers who had each worked in city schools in Guangdong for about eight years. Ms Zhang worked in a privately-run vocational school in the industrial Guangzhou suburb of Zengcheng, Mr Xu was employed in a state school in the resort town of Zhaoqing, and Mr Yang worked in a state school in central Guangzhou.¹⁴

Ms Zhang is the daughter of a kindergarten teacher. She grew up not far from the provincial capital Guangzhou. After graduating from university, she secured a reasonably well-paid job at a bank, but she never really adjusted to the financial corporate culture there. She heard through a family friend of an opening for a teaching position at a former state school that was being run as a private joint-venture. Zhang got the job and started work straight away, only becoming officially certified as a teacher after a few years on the job. She initially worked as a replacement teacher earning only 700 yuan a month, roughly the local minimum wage at the time. As a privately-hired employee she also lacked many of the benefits teachers in the state system enjoyed. Although she now earns around 5,000 yuan per month, which is more than former colleagues who found work in a local primary school, the public sector benefits they received, including a generous housing fund contribution, made their overall package much more attractive. Zhang and her husband could only just get by, she said, and had to live in a tiny apartment provided by the school.

After seven years on the job, Zhang said that she had struck a “glass ceiling.” Despite being one of the most successful teachers in her school, Zhang was not allowed to apply for a senior teaching position because she had not graduated from a teachers’ college. Moreover, the school still required her to work excessive hours, around 69 hours every week, including time spent grading papers at home. Zhang believes that she miscarried her first child because of the pressure of working long hours during the week and at weekends.

Apart from her own position, Zhang was extremely concerned about the overall direction and development of schooling in China over the last few decades. When she was a child, she said, her state school was considered one of the best in the province but today many state schools were

¹⁴ The names of the teachers have been changed and the names of their schools omitted at their request.

losing ground to expensive private schools. This phenomenon was restricting the opportunities for ordinary children to get a decent education, she said, not simply because they could not afford private schooling but because the private schools took many well-qualified and experienced teachers out of the state system.

Mr Xu also came from a family of teachers; his grandfather was a Chinese language teacher and Xu's family encouraged him to join the profession as well. Xu's first job after graduating from university in Guangzhou was in marketing at a foreign-owned firm in the city. But he eventually did go into teaching and ended up at one of the best schools in the picturesque city of Zhaoqing, a school where graduates have gone on to some of China's top universities.



Zhaoqing street scene, January 2000. Photo by Llee Wu. *Creative Commons Licence*.

Xu said his total take-home salary was around 5,000 yuan per month, consisting of a 2,500 yuan basic wage, plus performance pay and a housing allowance. He also received around 45 yuan per day for working at the weekend, helping out with student activities like sporting events. Although his overtime pay was absurdly low, Xu felt obliged to help out at the weekends and provide extra-curricular activities for the boarding school students.

Xu was not supportive of the performance pay system, which was designed in theory to “encourage the good teachers and punish lazy teachers.” From his perspective, Xu said, all teachers worked extremely hard and should be treated equally. Although conditions for teachers had improved in recent years, Xu said, these improvements had not kept pace with the rising cost of living.

Mr Yang grew up in a small, mountainous village a few hundred kilometres from Guangzhou. He began teaching in 2008 immediately after getting his master’s degree, and he is now in his eighth year as an English teacher at a prestigious public school in a newly urbanized and increasingly affluent district of Guangzhou. When he first began teaching, many of the students were the children of local farmers, factory workers or small shop owners, and his salary at that time was only about 4,000 yuan a month. But the rapid development of the city led to more middle-class families moving in and, in 2010, the district government started to invest significantly more in schools, raising wages and benefits for teachers. Yang now earns about 9,000 yuan per month, a few thousand yuan more than teachers of the same grade in neighbouring districts. Yang also enjoyed a relatively light work load of around 45 hours a week, plus grading outside of class. He also received an array of fringe benefits provided by the school, like a substantial annual bonus and an additional housing subsidy provided after the school eliminated the housing it used to allocate to teachers.

Of the three interviewees, Yang was clearly the most satisfied with his career choice and work conditions. However, even he was frustrated by the school’s focus on “teaching to the test” rather than cultivating the personal development of his students. He was also disappointed with the performance pay system, as the classifications for “good teachers” were rather arbitrary and subject to the personal preference of individual administrators.

Yang also expressed concern about the huge pay gap between those teachers on the state pay roll and those colleagues who worked on private contracts. He recalled how one colleague, a 40-year-old substitute teacher who came to Yang’s school on a year-long contract, had hoped for a well-paid permanent position (around 18,000 yuan a month for a teacher of his experience) after his initial contract expired but in the end was offered a contract paying just 4,000 yuan per month with no benefits.

Like Ms Zhang, Yang was also worried about the growing inequality in Chinese society. He said the rapid pace of urban development had created higher wages for some but also priced out the poor who once lived in the city. He was also alarmed at the gap between the extremely resource-rich

schools in cities like Shanghai, whose students are often ranked among the best in the world, and students in poor areas like his home town who continue to suffer from a lack of investment in basic education.

Summary of pay and working conditions for the three Guangdong teachers

	Ms Zhang	Mr Xu	Mr Yang
School	Private	State	State
Working hours	69 hours per week plus grading	58 hours per week plus grading and overtime	45 hours per week plus grading
Pay level	Basic	Intermediate	Basic
Teaching experience	7 years	7 years	8 years
Benefits	Partial social insurance coverage	Full social insurance and housing fund	Full social insurance, housing fund and additional subsidies
Approximate take- home pay each month	5,000 yuan	5,000 yuan	9,000 yuan

Although the three teachers varied in their level of job satisfaction, all three agreed that teachers had very few outlets to address or resolve their grievances, both at an individual and collective level. Zhang and Xu both noted that they shared many common grievances with other teachers but that taking collective action to address those grievances was difficult. Ms Zhang in particular noted that teachers in China did not have an effective trade union, certainly nothing like other trade unions she had heard of outside China that would fight for the rights and interests of teachers.

Rural community teachers in Jinxian county, Jiangxi

In November 2015, CLB talked to a group of mainly retired community teachers in the rural county of Jinxian, about an hour's drive from Nanchang, the provincial capital of Jiangxi. The teachers had been engaged in a long-running battle with the county government over its refusal to enforce national legislation and provide them with the benefits to which they were entitled.

In the early 1980s, the provincial government of Jiangxi started hiring community teachers to fulfil its compulsory education obligations rather than add fully qualified teachers to the official government payroll. The Jinxian teachers estimated that around 80 percent of the province's

primary and secondary school teachers hired in the 1980s and 1990s were community rather than state teachers. At the end of the 1990s, national policy makers attempted to address the problem by requiring local governments to place all public school teachers on the formal payroll with the pay and full benefits associated with that status. Many counties in Jiangxi responded by dismissing large numbers of community teachers without paying them any compensation. Laid off teachers were forced to find what jobs they could. Nearly all the teachers went back to their villages, mostly returning to farming to survive, while some found jobs in small shops in the local town.

The central and provincial governments subsequently issued directives on the proper compensation for elderly community teachers, but many local governments like Jinxian county refused to implement them. Frustrated by years of government intransigence, retired teachers in Jinxian began to mobilise in the 2000s, circulating petitions and appealing to the local government for lay-off compensation and pension benefits. Their efforts escalated after promulgation of the *Social Insurance Law* in 2010, which prompted the Jinxian teachers to ask questions about their own lack of benefits, and another national policy directive in 2011, which ordered provincial governments to address the long-standing issue of community teacher benefits. The teachers launched a wave of demonstrations, protests and petitions across the country in the 2010s which reached a peak in August 2015 when nearly 1,000 teachers from across the county gathered at the Jinxian county government building hoping to present a letter to officials demanding the fulfilment of their legal rights. (*See photo below.*)



Teachers between 50 and 80-years-old waited in the rain under umbrellas for hours, surrounded by armed police, but officials refused to meet with teacher representatives and receive their letter. Eventually, the police tried to break up the gathering and arrested three teachers' representatives. Hundreds of teachers gathered at the police station demanding the release of their representatives. The representatives were released after a few hours, but it took weeks before they received any official documentation on the reason for their detention.

After August's protests, the Jinxian teachers redoubled their organizing efforts. One teacher enlisted the help of his son, who had become an experienced labour organizer and activist after years of working in factories in the Pearl River Delta. The son had benefited from the training and support provided by civil society labour groups in Guangdong and understood the importance of electing representatives and maintaining solidarity in the face of harassment and intimidation. Teachers across the county held elections for around 100 village representatives and a steering committee of ten, which was headed by one of the arrested teacher representatives. Teachers organized around two central demands: compensation for layoffs and pensions for retired teachers. The teacher representatives also decided to bring a case against the police for their wrongful arrest.

As the teachers' campaign gathered momentum, the local government became increasingly nervous, both threatening and pleading with teacher representatives to drop their case. However, hundreds of teachers turned out for the hearing late last year. The court has consistently delayed any judgement in the wrongful arrest case, but the county government did give the teachers around 100 million yuan in a one-off compensation payment. Teachers were proud of this initial victory, but they did not stop there. They remain organized and determined to seek regular pension payments. In addition, the Jinxian teachers, with the help of younger activists, have attempted to reach out to other teacher networks in neighbouring counties who face similar problems.

Teachers' strikes and collective protests in China

The concerted and well-coordinated campaign of the Jinxian community teachers for compensation and pensions was just one of hundreds of strikes and collective protests by Chinese teachers over the last few years. China Labour Bulletin's **Strike Map** recorded 168 strikes and protests by teachers in the two years from 2014 to 2015. However, this only represents the incidents reported in the news media and on social media in China; the actual number is certainly much higher.

Teachers' strikes and protests recorded on CLB's Strike Map 2014-15 (grouped by province)



The most intense period of teacher activism in these two years came towards the end of 2014 when tens of thousands of teachers across China staged protests over low wages, social insurance contributions and wages in arrears. As noted in the introduction to this report, the most high-profile protests occurred in the north-eastern province of Heilongjiang; however, protests were

fairly evenly distributed across the whole of China, reflecting the widespread and systemic problems in the education system and lack of any effective channels for dispute resolution.

Teachers' collective actions only represented about four percent of all the strikes and protests by China's workers in 2014 and 2015, but given that teachers account for less than two percent of the total workforce, their actions must be seen as an important part of the overall labour movement in China.

Key issues in teacher protests

Low pay

Demands for higher pay featured in about 40 percent of the teachers' collective actions recorded on CLB's Strike Map from 2014 to 2015, a much higher proportion than many other groups of workers. In the same two-year period, by comparison, only eight percent of factory worker strikes and protests included demands for higher pay. This discrepancy can largely be explained by the fact that factory workers' wages increased noticeably in the early 2010s, while wages for many teaching professionals have remained at an appallingly low level.

- On 10 July 2015, hundreds of primary and middle teachers gathered at a government building in Fushun, Liaoning, to protest low pay and wage disparities in different city districts. (See *photo below*.) Teachers complained that their wage levels had dropped, while the pay of other public service officials had continued to rise. Moreover, teachers from four districts complained that their wages were significantly lower than other districts of Fushun.¹⁵ Teachers organized the protest using WeChat and QQ groups, telling colleagues to gather at 8.00 am and bring water and umbrellas to deal with the forecasted hot weather. One teacher encouraged others online to spread word of the protest plans, saying: "Don't blame other people. When it comes to our own rights, we have to stand up and protect them ourselves! By the time you realise your pension isn't enough then you're

¹⁵ “[抚顺数百教师市府前静坐 抗议政府克扣薪酬](#)” (“Several Hundred Teachers in Fushun Sit-in Outside City Government Building Protesting Government Embezzlement of Wages”) 大纪元 (*Epoch Times*), 11 July 2015.

not worth much at all! So be brave, pass on the message, and don't be like a turtle hiding in its shell, only blaming other people!"



- Teachers at a private school in Dongguan, Guangdong went on strike in February 2014, protesting low wages, lack of benefits and poor working conditions. Teachers at the Dalingshan Nanhua School claimed their take-home pay was around 2,000 yuan, and that the school offered no social security package whatsoever. Factory workers in Dongguan by comparison could earn nearly 3,000 yuan per month. The teachers had gone on strike in 2012, also over low wages, and won a 300-500 yuan pay increase. Media reports on the 2014 strike noted that teachers were reluctant to talk to reporters, as some teachers were fired for talking to the media during the previous strike. The 2014 strike eventually netted the teachers another slight pay increase of around 300 yuan.¹⁶

¹⁶ “[工资低 伙食差 老师集体闹停课](#)” (“Low Wages, Poor Food, Teachers Collectively Stop Holding Classes?”) *Dongguan Times*, 25 Feb. 2014.

Social insurance

The low pay of many teachers means that the social insurance and welfare benefits that they do receive become even more important. Disputes and protests often arise when schools or local governments attempt to deny teachers their due benefits. Older teachers, in particular, are more likely to press for the full payment of pensions and other social insurance coverage, such as medical care, as they approach retirement age.

- On 14 November 2014, 200 teachers gathered at the city government building in Zhaodong in Heilongjiang demanding payment of social insurance contributions in arrears. Teachers demanded access to public records for evidence of the city government's failure to contribute to the teachers' social insurance scheme, in particular their pension and housing funds. On 17 November, thousands of other primary and middle school teachers went on strike throughout Zhaodong and around 1,000 teachers joined demonstrations at the city government raising the same demands. On 26 November, a massive teachers strike occurred in cities around the provincial capital Harbin, with reports of 20,000 teachers in three separate cities participating in the strike. The teachers hailed the actions of their Zhaodong colleagues, and demanded resolution of unpaid social insurance contributions; in the course of their protests many teachers were arrested by police.¹⁷
- In January 2014, teachers at a private school in Taizhou, Jiangsu, went on strike shutting down their small private vocational school. The Taizhou Yinghua vocational school had initially made social insurance payments for teachers but had failed to make contributions for more than two years. Teachers reported that the school was approaching bankruptcy.¹⁸

Equal pay for equal work

Many teachers have to work longer hours for less pay than colleagues in the same position because they are classified differently by the school authorities. One of the biggest problems in

¹⁷ [中国工人运动观察报告：2013-2014](#) (The Workers' Movement in China 2013-2014), *China Labour Bulletin*, April 2015.

¹⁸ “[泰州英华职校 3 位老师罢课 学校没给他们买保险](#)” (“Taizhou Yinghua Vocational School 3 teachers Strike, School Didn't Buy Them Insurance”), 人民网 (*People's Daily Online*), 9 Jan. 2014.

China's state school system is that many teachers are denied the benefits to which they are entitled because they are not officially on the government payroll but are hired privately or on individual employment contracts.

- Teachers at a high school in Puyang, Henan held a demonstration in May 2015 after school administrators suddenly announced that only teachers who passed another round of examinations would be placed on the government payroll. (*See photo below*). Teachers, many of who had been waiting for more than a decade to get on the government payroll, signed a petition demanding an immediate response from the school administration.¹⁹
- In Dongying, Shandong teachers protested at a government building in November 2014, holding banners stating "Eliminate pay grades; equal pay for equal work." Teachers complained that basic level teachers worked excessive hours every week but only earned only around 4,000 yuan per month, far less than teachers in higher grades. The teachers stressed that they did not oppose pay grades as such but rather the corrupt system of pay grade advancement that was often based on the arbitrary decisions of management.²⁰



High school teachers in Puyang, Henan: "Our school flies high, yet we slave for ten years in the hope of getting on the government payroll, sacrificing our youth."

¹⁹ Wickedonna Blog [教师] (其他) 2015.5.29 > 河南 濮阳市一高 ([Teachers](Other) 2015.5.29 > Henan Puyang No. 1 Senior High School), 30 May 2015.

²⁰ Wickedonna Blog [教师] 2014.12.26 山东 东营市 河口区 ([Teachers] 2014.12.26 Shandong Dongying City Hekou District), Dec. 2014.

Wage arrears

The non-payment or delayed payment of wages is a serious and endemic problem across a wide range of industries in China, and the teaching profession is no exception. Wage arrears featured in about 40 percent of all teacher protests from 2014 to 2015. The problem was most serious, once again, in poor rural areas where local governments often struggled to meet payroll. Small, privately-run kindergartens have also often been the site of wage arrears protests.

- Around 40 teachers at a kindergarten in Yulin, Guangxi, went on strike on 21 October 2015.²¹ Teachers wrote a letter to management complaining of frequent wage arrears and lack of overtime payments, paid leave or sick leave, all of which they were entitled to under the *Labour Law*. The teaching staff demanded higher wages and better working conditions. The strike led to parents also complaining about high school fees and the poor quality meals for students.²² Teachers returned to work after negotiations with management in which management promised to send photographs of student meals to parents via social media to show their improved quality.
- In November 2014, hundreds of teachers at five different schools in Jingzhou, Hubei, went on strike within a four-day period over various wage arrears owed by the city government. Teachers discovered that not only were they among the lowest paid in the region but that they were forced to work overtime without pay while teachers in other districts did receive overtime pay. Teachers demanded payment for years of unpaid overtime, as well as government transparency regarding their annual wage adjustments.²³
- After years of problems with wage arrears, about 200 teachers at a private vocational college in Kunming, Yunnan went on strike in November 2014, shutting down the entire school, which had enrolled more than 3,000 students. School officials had reported difficulties paying wages after signing an agreement with a new investor in 2012. In their

²¹ [Wickedonna Blog \[教师\] \(欠薪\) 2015.10.21 > 广西玉林市容县\(\[Teachers\] \(Wage Arrears\) 2015.10.21 > Guangxi Yulin Rong county\), 23 Oct. 2015.](#)

²² [“罕见！容县首例幼儿园老师集体罢工事件！” \(“Rare! Rong county’s first strike of preschool teachers!”\), 微信号“微容县” \(WeChat Channel “Wei Rong County”\), 22 Oct. 2015.](#)

²³ [Wickedonna Blog 11月19至22日, 湖北省荆州市 \(November 19 – 22, Hubei Province Jingzhou City\), Nov. 2014.](#)

protest, the teachers demanded the termination of the school's relationship with the investor.²⁴

Protests across the whole spectrum of education

Teacher strikes and protests have erupted across the entire spectrum of education from kindergartens to universities, illustrating not only the deep-seated and widespread problems in China's education system as a whole but some of the issues specific to certain types of institutions.

Preschool

Preschool teachers are among the lowest paid in the profession. Many teachers are young and poorly qualified, and they often lack the bargaining power to demand better pay and conditions.

- Teachers at a preschool in Nanjing, Jiangsu, went on strike on 20 January 2015, protesting low pay and poor working conditions. Senior teachers made 1,500 yuan per month, while others made just 1,300 yuan (after deductions). Pay levels had not increased for several years.²⁵
- Preschool teachers in Mianyang, Sichuan, went on strike on 3 November 2015, protesting two months of wage arrears and a lack of social insurance. In addition, two teachers who had been on maternity leave without pay had been sacked when they sought to return to work.²⁶

Primary and middle school

Around two thirds of China's teachers are employed in primary and middle schools. Many teachers, especially in major cities, have secure, relatively well-paid jobs with good benefits.

²⁴ Wickedonna Blog [教师] 2014.11.12 云南 昆明市 云南科技信息职业学院 ([Teachers] 2014.11.12 Yunnan Kunming city Yunnan Vocational College of Science and Technology Information), Nov 2014.

²⁵ Wickedonna Blog [教师] 2015.1.20 江苏 南京市 大厂金鹏幼儿园 ([Teachers] 2015.1.20 Jiangxi Nanjing Dachang Jinpeng Preschool), 20 Jan. 2015.

²⁶ Wickedonna Blog [教师] (欠薪) 2015.11.3 > 四川 绵阳市 东方幼稚园 ([Teachers] (Wage Arrears) 2015.11.3 > Sichuan Mianyang Dongfang Preschool), 4 Nov. 2015.

Disputes and protests tend to arise when teachers' pay levels and benefits are threatened by changes in government policy or school maladministration.

- Thousands of teachers went on strike for several days in late December 2015 in Renhuai, Guizhou, demanding the full payment of performance pay from the city government. Teachers were promised an annual bonus payment of 25,000 yuan during the previous school year but were only paid 10,000 yuan.²⁷ Teachers tried to address their grievances for a year through various legal channels but with no success. On 24 December, the strike began with around 1,000 teachers²⁸ and quickly spread to all schools across the city. On 28 December, thousands of teachers surrounded the city government building and were met with hundreds of riot police, though there were no reports of clashes or arrests. Many teachers received phone calls from school administrators, some begging them to return, others threatening their jobs.
- Teachers at a small private primary school in Guangzhou went on strike in October 2014, protesting management practices. School administrators had recently signed management rights to an education management company that led to a drastic decline in teachers' working conditions. Teachers claimed that management had required them to actively recruit students or face pay cuts. After the teachers went on strike, local government officials stepped in to mediate and the education company was stripped of its management rights at the school.²⁹

High school

The ever-increasing demand for higher education in China's modern economy has put tremendous pressure on China's high school teachers in both the academic and vocational tracks.

²⁷ “[贵州 6000 教师罢课抗议奖金遭克扣 连续维权近一周仍无果](#)” (“Guizhou 6000 Teachers strike protesting embezzlement of bonuses, continue fighting for their rights for nearly a week still without results”), 新生代 (*ILABOUR.net*), 3 Jan. 2016.

²⁸ [Wickedonna Blog](#) [\[教师\]（克扣工资）2015.12.24](#) > 贵州 遵义市 仁怀市 ([Teachers](Wage Embezzlement) 2015.12.24 > Guizhou Zunyi Renhuai), 25 Dec. 2015.

²⁹ “[忧待遇不保 老师集体停课](#)” (“Concerned with inadequate treatment, teachers strike”), 信息时代 (*Information Times*), 10 Oct 2014.

For many students, the role of high school is to prepare for the college entrance exam, and teachers can often only get decent pay if their students get good grades.

- Teachers at Chenjia High School in Kai county, Chongqing went on strike in June 2014, demanding payment of the performance pay that was due to them. (*See photo below.*) The teachers had discovered that, in some other counties, teachers had been awarded performance pay for good exam results but that teachers in Kai county had not. One teacher remarked: “We just heard that Chongqing had great scores on the national college entrance exam, and right after that our pay is withheld from us. Is this some special feature of Kai county?” Teachers marched through the rain with banners reading “Give back the 12,000 yuan owed to each of the Chenjia teachers.”³⁰



³⁰ [Wickedonna Blog 6月25日，重庆市开县，陈家中学高中教师罢课](#) (June 25, Chongqing city Kai county, Chenjia High School Teachers Strike), June 2014.

College and University

The rapid growth of tertiary education in China, particularly in the private sector, has led to an increasing number of disputes in colleges and universities over contracts, benefits and pay disparities.

- Privately contracted teachers at the City College of Dongguan Technology University held demonstrations in October 2015, demanding the same pay as teachers on the government payroll.³¹ More than 100 teachers marched through university grounds with banners demanding equal pay. Teachers complained that management had not fulfilled its 2010 promise to address the income gap. Teachers demanded face-to-face meetings with management and an immediate remedy to the problem and threatened to escalate their actions if their demands were not met. The teachers' monthly pay was approximately 1,000 yuan lower than those on the government payroll.³²
- In June 2015, teachers at the Chongqing Nanfang Translators College held a demonstration on campus demanding payment of social security contributions in arrears.³³ This protest escalated into a strike of 300 teachers in November,³⁴ which pitted teachers against their politically well-connected local employer, the Nanfang group. Teachers complained that the company had turned the school into a money-making machine: Wages had not risen in years and management had not contributed to their social insurance fund.

Rural teachers

Rural teachers are not only poorly paid and often lack proper benefits, they have also been subject to decades of discriminatory and exploitative government policies that have allowed disputes to drag on for 20 years or more in some cases.

³¹ [Wickedonna Blog](#) [\[教师\]（欠薪）2015.10.19](#) > 广东 东莞理工学院城市学院([Teachers](Wage Arrears) 2015.10.19 > Guangdong Dongguan University of Technology), *Wickedonna.blogspot.hk* 19 Oct 2015.

³² “[东莞的专上学院老师也抗争 同工同酬点会无可能？](#)” (“Dongguan Post-Secondary college teachers also struggling, is equal pay for equal work impossible?”), 红气球 (*Red Balloon Solidarity*), 5 Nov. 2015.

³³ [\[教师\]（欠缴社保）2015.6.19](#) > 重庆 南方翻译学院([Teachers](Social Insurance Contribution Arrears) 2015.6.19 > Chongqing Nanfang Translators College), *Wickedonna.blogspot.hk*, 20 June 2015.

³⁴ “[重庆南方翻译学院三百教师罢课维权](#)” (“300 teachers at Chongqing Nanfang Translators College strike to defend their rights,”) 自由亚洲电台 (*Radio Free Asia*), 11 Nov 2015.

- In late November 2015, about 200 teacher representatives from across Heilongjiang gathered at the provincial education ministry building in Harbin demanding compensation for layoffs and resolution of medical insurance and pension issues. (*See photo below.*) They claimed to represent thousands of rural teachers from across Heilongjiang. A key issue in the teachers' struggle stretched back into the late 1990s when the government promised to allow some community teachers on to the government payroll. Despite passing all the tests they were required to take for the positions, the jobs were instead given to friends and relatives of local officials.³⁵



³⁵ “[黑龙江两百民办教师教育厅集体请愿 要求解医疗及养老待遇](#)” (“200 community school teachers collectively petition at provincial education ministry demanding resolution of medical and pension treatment”), 自由亚洲电台 (*Radio Free Asia*), 27 Nov. 2015.

Analysis of teacher protests in China

One of the most constant themes in teacher protests over the last two years, and indeed over the last two decades or more, has been the tension between national government policy, the implementation of that policy by local governments, and the administration of local government policy by individual schools. Teachers across China have on numerous occasions demonstrated a high-degree of legal knowledge, especially with regard to the provisions of the *Teachers Law*, and have used specific government regulations and legal provisions to support their claims against local government departments or school administrators.

The nature and form of teacher protests are often determined by the particular grievances and tempered by the teachers' sense of responsibility to their students. Probably the most common form of protest involves a demonstration in a public place or a sit-in outside a government building in an attempt to get the attention of the local authorities and force the government to address their grievances. Strikes and work stoppages, on the other hand, are relatively uncommon because teachers often don't want to interrupt their students' education or risk losing public support for their cause. Teachers, particularly those in kindergartens and elementary schools have sometimes been criticised by parents and members of the public for going out on strike. However, in other cases, both students and parents have voiced their support for teachers' strike action. The decision on when to protest is largely determined by individual conditions and the determination of teachers to take a stand; some teachers wait until the summer vacation so as not to disrupt students' schooling, while other teachers strike during the school term, or even in the run-up to exams, in order to create a more immediate impact.

Teachers have in addition demonstrated the ability to utilise social media both in organizing protests and in publicising their grievances. This organizing ability has allowed several teachers' protests to spread quickly and incorporate colleagues in neighbouring areas who were facing similar issues. The 2014 Heilongjiang strikes, for example, began with a few teachers demonstrating at a government building but soon spread within a matter of days to include an estimated 20,000 teachers around the province. Individual counties can be very quick to organize, as was the case with primary and middle school teachers in Ma'anshan, Anhui in December 2014; Tongling, Anhui in December 2014; Yuzhou, Henan in December 2014; and the Renhuai dispute mentioned above. Teachers are often aware of similar protests by colleagues in nearby districts that brought about successful results. The Jinxian teachers in Jiangxi, for example, were inspired

to protest in front of the county government building after the success of retired teachers in a neighbouring county.

Despite teachers' often confrontational tactics and large-scale protests, local governments have been more reluctant to send in police to break up protests and arrest demonstrators than they would with factory workers, for example. In the 168 teachers' strikes and protests documented across China in 2014 and 2015, police only intervened in 36 cases and arrests were made in 14 of those interventions. Moreover, even when teachers were arrested, in most cases they were released within a matter of hours, like the retired community teachers in Jinxian. By contrast, CLB's Strike Map shows that police intervened in 193 of the 469 factory disputes in Guangdong in the same period, and made arrests in 65 of those disputes.



Police keep an eye on teachers protesting outside the Shuangcheng city government building in Heilongjiang.
November 2014.

Conclusion and recommendations

China's workers' movement is still largely dominated by blue collar workers however the country's more than 13 million school teachers have played a key role in that movement by taking a determined stand in defence of their legal rights and in pushing for better pay and working conditions. Teachers are one of the few white collar groups in China to regularly take industrial action: They are usually well-organized, have a good understanding of their legal entitlements, and can present a clear list of demands to both school administrators and local government officials.

The close relationship between teachers and local governments adds a political dimension to their struggle, and as such their collective actions can be seen by local government officials as a threat to social stability. However, local authorities are often reluctant to take a heavy-handed approach in dealing with such protests and seem more willing to negotiate with teacher representatives than with workers from other industries.

Despite their concerted efforts over several decades, many teachers still face low wages, long working hours and a lack of social security. Currently, it is only state school teachers in affluent cities who can really be assured of decent pay for decent work. Teachers in smaller cities, particularly those employed by private institutions or those in public/private partnerships, often have much lower pay, fewer benefits and little opportunity for promotion or career advancement. Teachers in poor rural districts are in the worst position of all, facing not only low pay and a lack of benefits but also frequent wage arrears as a result of local government corruption and incompetence.

All teachers, across the board, complain about the lack of a real teachers' trade union or an effective mechanism to resolve labour disputes both within schools and with the local government. The lack of any institutional bargaining mechanism, combined with the general reluctance of school administrators to negotiate with teachers, means that teachers usually have no option but to go on strike or stage mass protests if they want to resolve their grievances.

In light of the above, **China Labour Bulletin recommends** that the Chinese government take the following measures:

- Provide additional funding to poor rural school districts to ensure that all state school teachers have the remuneration to which they are legally entitled. This would have the additional benefit of making sure that parents in these districts are not charged excessive fees for their children's education and thereby help ensure that students stay in school for the full nine years of their compulsory education.
- Stipulate that teachers' performance pay should not be used as a means to reduce basic pay. All teachers should receive a basic wage that reflects their level of expertise and experience. Moreover, the basic wage for entry-level staff should be at least the average wage of the administrative district they are employed in.
- Create a mechanism by which teachers can engage in collective bargaining to establish acceptable standards for pay, working hours, benefits etc. within individual schools and across district and regional jurisdictions. This would effectively remove the arbitrary decision-making power of school administrators, which has been the source of much frustration and unrest in the teaching profession in China.
- Ensure that all the pay and benefit standards that teachers are entitled to are transparent and publicly available. This would allow teachers to compare pay and conditions in neighbouring districts and put pressure on local governments to raise standards in line with the norm.
- Promote the much-needed task of trade union reform. School trade unions should be reorganized and hold democratic elections so that they can effectively represent all teachers, cleaners and catering staff etc. The individual unions should then be formed into local and eventually regional federations that can give teachers a powerful voice in local education policymaking and help protect teachers' overall interests in that region.

If China's teachers are to be elevated to the higher social status they deserve, the Chinese government quite simply needs to make education a priority. The authorities should stop relying on the private sector to make up for the shortfalls in the state-school system and provide sufficient funds and resources to ensure that all students receive at least nine years of free education and that all teachers enjoy decent pay for decent work.