

1923

Although 1922 was a high-water mark for the Chinese labour movement, most strikes advanced simple economic demands. Concerned by the lack of political motivation among the workers, the Communist leadership focused its efforts on shifting the terrain of labour struggle to more political grounds, mobilising workers against imperialism and warlordism, while calling for freedom of association. The most high-profile attempt at politically organising workers occurred on the Beijing–Hankou Railway, where the influence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was particularly strong. In addition to the workers' club at Changxindian, by the end of 1922, sixteen similar groups had been set up at other stations along the line. After a series of preliminary meetings, in January 1923, a preparatory committee comprising representatives from most of these clubs announced its decision to formally inaugurate the Beijing–Hankou Railway Federation of Trade Unions in Zhengzhou on 1 February. Even in the face of the manifest displeasure of the warlords who then dominated northern China—first and foremost, Wu Peifu and Cao Kun—the meeting went ahead as scheduled but, as the representatives began to disperse, several delegates were arrested. In response, some 30,000 workers went on strike on 4 February—a mobilisation that was eventually drowned in blood. According to Tony Saich, it was the 7 February massacre that caused the CCP leadership to realise that the Party could not rely on the strength of the workers alone in its struggle against foreign imperialists and domestic warlords.¹ The following account, written just weeks after the strike by Luo Zhanglong, a Communist labour organiser who played an important role in those events, offers a detailed description of the strike and the ensuing slaughter.

The 7 February Massacre

LUO Zhanglong

(Translated by Tony SAICH)²

In line with the decision to call a general strike, on the morning of 4 February, each branch put up leaflets informing passengers of the justness for workers to organise trade unions to improve their living standards and to fight against oppression. The railway authorities and warlords should not interfere so harshly and unreasonably as to prohibit the development of trade unions. The trade union is the workers' second life and therefore cannot, under any circumstances, be allowed to suffer harm. It must be supported even to the extent of sacrifice. We warmly hope that you will forgive us for our attempt to attain freedom.

They took an official letter to the factory director and handed over their work tools, left the factory in an orderly fashion and in a quiet manner declared the start of the Zhengzhou strike. At Changxindian, within a few hours of nine o'clock, all workers had stopped. By twelve o'clock, all passenger, freight, and military trains had stopped running. All workers acted in accordance with the Federation of Trade Union's orders that did not allow individual negotiations, compromise, or mediation. During the period of the strike, no worker was permitted to act alone. If something important arose, and it was necessary to leave, the worker had to request a permit from the trade union. With this, the pickets could let the worker pass; without it, the worker would be detained. In addition to the picket groups, investigation teams were organised. The picket groups were responsible for maintaining public order during the strike, while the investigation teams were in charge of secret inquiries and sometimes carried out sentry duties or night patrols. Each ten trade union members formed one group, electing one as the group head, who would be responsible for them. Thus, it only took a few minutes to convene a meeting of several thousand.

Deployment was decided upon and the confrontation with the railway authorities lasted three days. Before the 7 February massacre broke out, order was extremely strict. For the sake of convenience, let me note below the events at Changxindian, Zhengzhou, Jiang'an, and the other large stations.

Changxindian

After the delegates to Zhengzhou returned, they convened a committee meeting to report on the crushing of the federation and its decision. They began to prepare strike procedures. The day after next [4 February], at Niangnianggong, they convened a general meeting of all trade union members. Three thousand workers attended. After the committee delivered a report on the situation, the masses were incensed and their shouts shook heaven and earth. All were willing to fight for freedom ...

At noon on the day of the strike, a train arrived from Baoding. As soon as it arrived at Changxindian, the trade union ordered it to stop. In the night, a train travelling northwards from Hankou was also ordered to stop. The workers treated the passengers quite politely: they hired horse-drawn carriages for the male passengers and invited female passengers to stay in the workers' houses, sending them on to Beijing the next day. As a result, the ordinary people formed a good impression of the workers.

On the morning of 5 February, the railway authorities received a secret order from Wu [Peifu] and Cao [Kun] calling on them to treat the strike severely. At the same time, waiters at the railway's Beijing General Bureau held a sympathy strike, causing it to become extremely quiet. On the same day, [Director of the Beijing-Hankou Railway Bureau] Zhao Jixian issued a bulletin full of threatening words and ordering workers to return to work. Seeing that the workers paid no attention to it, he sent three propagandists to lure the trade union to negotiate. His general idea was that first they should return to work and that then conditions could be discussed. The workers refused. They left without any result. At that moment, Wu Peifu sent a telegram saying that he had 500 engineers who could shoulder the task of restoring communications and giving Zhao a free hand. From one o'clock onwards that afternoon, several batches of fully armed troops brought by railway officials had reached Changxindian. They were: the battalion of patrol commanded by Zhang Guoqing, the second battalion of the brigade commanded by Shi Quansheng, and the sixth company of Liulihe. On arrival, they were stationed at strategic points. The workers went to them to demonstrate and distributed leaflets to them. This moved the soldiers very much ...

Six battalions of troops encircled Changxindian. They prohibited workers from walking up and down, talking, and holding meetings, and they set up a sentry post every ten paces. They also sent many secret agents to the trade union to find out the addresses of the union's leading

personnel. However, crafty Zhao Jixian moderated his attitude and sent emissaries to make contact with the trade union delegates. It was clear that he was investigating the circumstances of the trade union leaders to arrange his vicious intrigue.

On the morning of 6 February, a trade union investigation team reported that army actions were uncertain and it was said that a large number of troops would arrive from Zhuzhou. For a short while, the atmosphere in the city became more tense. The workers could see that the serious situation in Changxindian would lead to tragedy, but they would not regret dying for freedom and thus did not change their attitude. To put an end to the rumours, the trade union issued its second manifesto on 6 February ...

On the same day, Zhao Jixian issued an order to arrest about fifty trade union committee and other staff members. At 12.50pm, 120 new workers were brought here from the Tanggu shipyard. They were sent to Changxindian, Baoding, Zhengzhou, and other stations under the protection of troops commanded by Han Zhengqing, an adjutant of the fourteenth brigade, and Meng Bingxiang, a representative of the Beijing–Hankou Railway Bureau and director of a printing house. Scabs, who had been expelled from the trade union, were chosen as foremen and 500 soldiers were sent to train with them. It was declared that if the striking workers did not return to work quickly, they would be dismissed and sent home by force. In addition, wages already paid would be recovered and their families would also be arrested. The workers paid no heed to these threatening words. Later, Mr Tang, a representative of the Beijing Mayor and concurrently magistrate of Wanping County, and others arrived at the trade union. They claimed to be willing to act as mediators, but their words were full of threat and deceit. The workers said that conditions had to be decided on by the federation and that the branch had no right to negotiate. Negotiations should be conducted between the railway authorities and the federation. If the federation issues an order to return to work, naturally our branch will obey the order. Having failed in his objective, Tang went away. Indeed, Tang came with other intentions: to spy on the true circumstances of the trade union so as to catch the whole lot in a trap.

In the afternoon, two battalions of troops that had arrived from Zhuzhou and the heads of small stations took over as engine drivers and workers. Shi Quansheng's troops arrived at Changxindian in full battle array and stood in combat readiness. At 11pm that night, troops were ordered to arrest trade union leaders. The trade union staff and leaders were living

in the workers' homes. Thus, when the troops reached the trade union, they arrested no-one but robbed the trade union of money and furniture and intended to set the house on fire. Luckily, this was avoided through the persuasion of a certain man. Later, they searched the workers' families one by one and arrested, among others, Shi Wenbin, Chen Limao, Wu Ba, Hong Yinfu, and Wu Ruming, a teacher at the trade union school—eleven people in all. It was late on a severe winter night. While carrying out the search, the soldiers engaged in looting and beating. This disturbance caused great misery throughout the city. The workers' wives and children cried out loudly. The eleven arrested were stripped of their clothes and sent naked to the brigade headquarters. The brigade commander shouted out an order for them to be savagely beaten, not allowing them to speak. They were manacled and left on the ground until daybreak when they were to be sent to Baoding for a reward to be claimed. This angered the workers, and their pitiful cries filled the air.

At daybreak, 3,000 or 4,000 people gathered in front of the brigade headquarters. They carried a big banner with the words 'Release the arrested workers' and several small flags. Together, they shouted, 'Send back our fellow workers!' and 'Return our freedom!' Finding that the masses possessed great strength and were highly motivated, the brigade commander ordered his troops to charge. A large body of fully armed soldiers dashed out from inside and fiercely attacked the workers. For a short while, bullets fell like rain, knives and swords flew through the air. This was followed by a cavalry charge. Sadly, those among the many thousands hit by the bullets fell to the ground. In the end, four were killed, over thirty were seriously wounded (some died the next day), over thirty were arrested, and countless numbers were slightly wounded or were forced to flee. Soldiers seized the opportunity to loot and kill people wantonly. Inhabitants closed their doors and order in the city disintegrated. The Changxindian Trade Union was compelled to move elsewhere. The eleven arrested were sent under guard to Baoding ...

Seeing the dead and wounded workers, Zhao thought he had succeeded with his scheme. On the one hand, he urged Baoding to kill the eleven staff members and, on the other hand, he fabricated a telegram saying the workers had died because they had fought the soldiers with pistols. His trick was the same as those of Xiao Yaonan and Feng Yun. At that time, Changxindian workers were forcibly dragged into the factory to work.

If they refused, they were shot on the spot. Countless numbers died in this way. Zhao did not even allow the wounded workers to go out or go to a doctor, with the result that the majority of them also died.

After the workers had been compelled to go to the factory, they were not allowed to talk to each other or ask for leave. This would risk severe punishment. In addition, he [Zhao] took the opportunity to put his trusted followers in key positions and to expel all the workers who had ever worked for the trade union and to compel their families to return wages that had already been paid. The crowd was extremely harassed. They organised a group of guards, each carrying a pistol, to look for enemies and daily they took their revenge. By this time, the warlords had forcibly occupied the railway as if it was their private property and Zhao claimed himself their domestic servant and running dog. Yet his various methods could not subdue the minds of the workers. Over several days, the workers fled. He could not restore communications. Order in the factory was extremely chaotic. It was the inhabitants of Changxindian who suffered from the daily encirclement. Troops and horses walked back and forth and the people suffered unbearable disturbances such as arrest.

Zhengzhou

At twelve o'clock in the morning of 4 February, Zhengzhou began a general strike in accordance with the orders of the federation. It issued a manifesto to explain it clearly to the outside world. At the same time, every worker carried a leaflet saying: 'Fellow workers! Because we suffer from numerous oppressions, we are obliged to call a general strike on the whole railway. It is distressing for us to do so. With heart and mind, we must carry it through to the end. We must adhere strictly to orders and await the federation's settlement.'

This leaflet tells us that the strike is being held in a consistent spirit of unity. That afternoon [4 February], Jin Yunè, division commander of the fourteenth division, called in Gao Bin, Jiang Haishi, and Liu Wensong, presidents of the Zhengzhou Trade Union, to the division's headquarters. As soon as he saw them, he began to use foul, abusive language. Gao, paying no attention to this abuse, handed him the Strike Bulletin issued by the federation. After seeing it, he said, 'You obey the orders of the federation. You have no powers so there is no need to talk with you.' They went out.

On 5 February, all was peaceful. That night, a police officer went to Gao Bin's and Jiang Haishi's homes saying that the division commander had invited them to the fourteenth division's club for a talk. When Gao and Jiang arrived, Huang Diancheng was also there. Huang ordered their arrest and had them manacled like robbers. Liu Wensong thought that three were responsible for the trade union. Hearing the news that two of them had been put in prison, he felt that he should not escape and try to live ignobly. Immediately, he rushed to the club and asked to be treated the same as the other two. On hearing this, the people were indignant at the abuse of power by the troops and the police and they were moved by Liu's spirit. This intensified even more their hatred of the warlords.

On the morning of 6 February, another two people were arrested: Wang Zongpei and Qian Nenggui. Wang was arrested by plainclothes police while cleaning up at home. His comings and goings made it appear that he was not a good man. Qian had a problem with the police because of his son and the police, harbouring a hatred for him, used this chance to take revenge. They were also manacled. Qian's hands were bound so tightly that his wrists became swollen.

The same morning, the five were driven to the station where they were to be put on public show to intimidate the workers. But the workers were not afraid; on the contrary, they were aroused and indignant. In the afternoon, the police hired men to beat gongs, calling on the workers to return to work. However, the workers paid no attention to them. On 7 February, Jiang and Wang were released. Jiang was forced to go from door to door with a white flag to persuade the workers to return to work. The workers paid no attention to him. Later, Wang was sent under escort to the northern section to try the same form of persuasion. It was said later that Wang fled from Shundai Station to go to Beijing to present a petition to the assembly.

The same morning, Gao, Liu, and Qian were sent under escort to the trade union. The fourteenth division spent twenty-five yuan on light refreshments for their consumption. In addition, they ordered the adjutant Lin Baobi (once a worker, his father and son were workers, a fact that enabled him to come into contact with the workers) to persuade the three to issue an order to return to work. They were unmoved.

On 8 February, Huang Dianchen coerced the president of the county chamber of commerce to collect together thirty or forty rascals to hold a People's Assembly at the Puluo Theatre. A large number of troops were

stationed inside and outside of the meeting place. Huang was in sole charge of the whole show. He printed 1,000 leaflets and made 400 flags. After the meeting, he hired a bunch of rural beggars to parade waving the flags and to distribute leaflets. The main points of the leaflets are as follows:

First the strike on the Beijing–Hankou Railway is knowingly intended to stir up trouble. Second, the workers should consider six factors:

- (1) Within twelve hours, the workers should be compelled to return to work. If not, all supplies will be cut off. If anyone dares to supply workers and their families, he or she will be treated as a disruptive partisan.
- (2) If a worker does not go to work, the landlord will cancel their lease. If anyone secretly puts up workers and their families, the house will be confiscated.
- (3) All workers willing to return to work may go to the station to collect a pass.
- (4) Troops and police will help drive the undesired workers out of the district.
- (5) If workers are robbed by bandits, troops and police should not protect them.
- (6) Since the workers on the Long–Hai Railway have not taken part in the strike, troops and police should give them special protection.

The twelve-hour limit passed but neither did the merchants cut off supplies to the workers nor did the landlords cancel the workers' lease. Thus, was the farce of the fake People's Assembly exposed. The workers laughed at it. On 9 February, Tang Tingxi made use of his connections to get his job back. He was an engine driver who had been brought in to organise a training class to destroy the trade union. Because of this, he came under attack and the trade union demoted him. When he regained his position, his son was promoted from fireman to engine driver. He collected together his followers to surrender to the warlords in order to destroy the strike. Through threats and tricks, he got together a

bunch of ignorant workers. Thus, about 100 workers got passes for work. The other workers, on hearing of the 7 February Hankou massacre and seeing that the fight was as good as lost, swallowed the insults and were obliged to return to work on the condition that Gao, Liu, and Qian be set free.

That day, two incidents worthy of note occurred: 1) Vice director Wan Yulin, on seeing the workers return to work, asked, 'Did you not say that you should go to work according to federation orders? Why are you going to work now?' Those in the training class on hearing of this reported it to the fourteenth division. Wan was arrested at once. 2) Engine driver Peng Zhanyuan, unwilling to return, asked for leave but was caught and beaten 200 times by the military batons of the fourteenth division. Craftsman Ma Dingqing, unwilling to return to work, on asking for leave, was slapped in the face by the Director of the Beijing-Hankou Police, Hu Bo. After he had been beaten black and blue, he was arrested. Fortunately, later on, Gao, Liu, and Qian were released. However, to date, we do not know how Wan, Peng, and Ma have been dealt with.

During the strike at Zhengzhou, no worker died but about 300 workers lost their jobs. The warlord has sent more and more soldiers to work, to date some 800. None of the trade union staff could remain in Zhengzhou. Most fled to various places and tried to find work there.

Jiang'an

The second day of the general strike (5 February), Xiao Yaonan sent his chief-of-staff, Zhang Housheng, to Jiang'an. First, Zhang ordered a local police officer to threaten the trade union and to hand over Yang Defu, Zhu Lantian, Zhang Lianguang, Luo Haichen, and Lin Xiangqian. The trade union replied, 'If Cao, Wu, and the Ministry of Communications send a responsible delegate here, the federation will, of course, send a plenipotentiary to establish contacts. If not, we regret that we cannot receive you.'

By noon, it was reported that the factory had been occupied by a large number of troops and that the Dazhimen Station had begun to sell tickets. Zhang Housheng had found two engine drivers and, under threat from the troops and police, had ordered them to drive at once. On hearing of this, the branch committee sent pickets to make inquiries. Within a moment, about 2,000 workers met in front of the factory gate and they tried to break through the defence line of the troops and police to rescue

their two fellow workers. The trade union sent four special delegates—Zhang Lianguang, Xiang Feilong, Luo Haichen, etc.—to ask the troops and police to free the three workers who had been arrested without any reason. Despite the many threats of the troops and police, even threats to kill, the delegates stood firm. When the troops and police had run out of ideas, they decided to set the three workers free. The failure of the enemy's threat was followed by defeat.

After Wuhan Trade Union delegates returned from Zhengzhou, they told the public of the oppression and repression of freedoms they had encountered. Some wept bitterly, others burned with anger. Their rousing attitude and militancy moved heaven and earth and made the ghosts and gods weep. As a result, despite all the sacrifices, the trade union delegates decided to show solidarity with the other workers on the Beijing–Hankou Railway.

On the third day of the strike, the trade unions sent over 100 flag-waving delegates to Jiang'an to bring greetings. A meeting was held in Jiang'an to express sympathy and about 10,000 participated. First, comrade Yang Defu, the President of the Executive Committee of the Beijing–Hankou Federation of Trade Unions, reported on the significance of receiving and greeting the delegates and stated the importance of and prospect for the general strike. Following Yang's speech, dozens of trade union delegates and *Zhenbao* journalists spoke passionately. Finally, comrade Li Zhenying, General Secretary of the Federation, delivered a speech for the federation, saying: 'This general strike of ours is the key to the fate of the working class in our country. Our aim is not for wage increases and a decrease in working hours but to fight for freedom and human rights. We are the defenders of freedom and of the interests of the Chinese people. Fellow workers! We must understand what a great responsibility we the Beijing–Hankou Railway workers are shouldering. The apathetic society needs to be immersed in our blood. Fellow workers! We should be the vanguard in the overthrow of the warlords. Only advance! Don't retreat!'

All at once someone in the crowd shouted again and again: 'Long live the Federation of the Beijing–Hankou Railway!'; 'Long live the Federation of the Hubei Trade Unions!'; 'Proletarians of the world unite!' The masses joined in, shouting thunderously. The masses, full of indignation, held a large-scale demonstration. It lasted for two hours, starting from Jiang'an and passing through the foreign concessions. Some 3,000 people joined in along the way. Many merchants on the route shouted, 'Welcome!' The police on point duty did not dare intervene.

This is a situation that is rarely seen. Who could have known that the delegates of the Military Governor, Xiao Yaonan, and the foreign capitalists were holding a meeting in the concession to prepare a slaughter?

On 7 February, four days and nights had passed since the beginning of the strike. Several times, Xiao Yaonan sent his chief-of-staff, Zhang Housheng, to entice the support of key people. These visits were rejected by the trade union. The trade union raised eleven preconditions for mediation and negotiation. The meeting between the two sides was to be conducted on the basis of equal responsibility. At the same time, it was said that Feng Yun had crossed the river to entreat Xiao to suppress the strike by military force. Each day, Xiao and Wu exchanged several telegrams. At two o'clock on the afternoon of 7 February, a police officer came and said: 'On Military Governor Xiao's order, I have come to ask the federation to send plenipotentiaries for negotiations. If you agree, chief-of-staff Zhang will come immediately to meet and talk. To show his sincerity, he will put on civilian clothes. The six conditions you raised can be recognised. First, please send the list of your plenipotentiaries.' Then the federation's plenipotentiaries, Li Zhenying and Zhang Lianguang, received him and the police officer's politeness amid the troop and police encirclement aroused suspicions of insincerity. As a result, they did not use their real names during the talk.

Later, the opposition changed its tricks and invited the federation's plenipotentiaries to meet at 5.20pm at the trade union, saying that the chief-of-staff would come himself. After delivering the message, the police officer hurried away. At 5.20pm as the delegates were on their way to the meeting, they suddenly heard many shots. Thus, the bloody tragedy began. Having lured all the leaders of the trade union to meet together, they felt that their chance had come. The chief-of-staff sped at the head of two battalions of fully armed troops to encircle the trade union and they fired over five volleys. Several hundred workers were waiting for news in front of the gates at the time. They had no time to escape. Barehanded, they had no means of resistance. Zeng Yuliang and thirty-two other workers were killed in the confused gunfire and the rattle of sabres. Over 200 workers were wounded. After this massacre in front of the trade union, the soldiers began to hunt people down and carried out various robberies. The younger brother of the branch president was murdered and the nephew of the federation's president had his legs chopped from under him. They killed at will and looted without restraint. According to statistics, there were three successive robberies a night on Fujian Street.

They even made a clean sweep of the smallest belongings of the workers' families. The situation was unbearable, so much so that the tears shed would empty the Yangzi and Han rivers.

During the robbery at the Jiang'an Branch, about sixty workers were arrested including Lin Xiangqian, president of the Jiang'an Branch Committee. Lin was bound to the station pole and forced to give an order to return to work. Comrade Lin resolutely refused, saying: 'The strike is a matter of life and death for 30,000 workers on the whole railway. Our branch will not return to work without the federation's order. You may cut off my head, but I won't give an order to return to work.' The same question and reply were repeated three times. Zhang Housheng shouted an order to 'cut off his head and hang it up as a warning to all'. His head was indeed hung up in the station. Observing strict discipline, he did not give in before his death. How could a man do otherwise if he was fighting for the benefit of the working class? Xiao Yaonan issued an open telegram saying that Lin Xiangqian had been killed in a fight with a pistol. This was a rumour fabricated entirely by the warlords to cheat the people. If the workers had had weapons how could such a massacre have occurred? Why had none of the soldiers been killed or wounded? Anyone with common sense could understand the reality of the situation ...

After the Jiang'an massacre happened, all the Wuhan working people were filled with righteous indignation. To support the Beijing-Hankou workers, they called a general strike in the name of the Hubei Federation of Trade Unions ...

At this time, Xiao Yaonan was alarmed, unable to sit down or sleep easily. A terrible atmosphere reigned in Wuhan. Xiao convened a special meeting to proclaim martial law ...

After the orders were issued, the Wuhan market was desolated and the situation became increasingly serious. Each concession recruited a team of volunteers to protect itself. For a time, a state of anxiety existed as if a great disaster would come. But it was only a trick. Xiao Yaonan's intention was to use this special martial law to murder those whom he perceived to be enemies. Later, he ordered the arrest of seventeen trade union leaders and related personnel such as Yang Defu and Chen Tian.

Xiao Yaonan bitterly hated the lawyer Shi Yang because he had become the legal adviser to the federation. Thus, he had him arrested on 7 February and sent under escort to the Military Governor's office. Being a leader of the Wuhan working class, Shi Yang devoted himself to the labour movement. He did not regret that this destroyed his family nor that it

created extra work. On 15 February, Xiao had him shot in Wuchang on the charge of inciting the strike. After he killed Shi, he drove his wife and younger son out of Hubei. Being so cruel and unreasonable, he was inferior to the wild beasts.

Other Stations

Needless to say, since Changxindian and Jiang'an had suffered the same disaster, every other branch on the small stations was also trampled on. He Liquan and Bai Yueyao, the presidents of the Baoding Branch Committee were arrested by Cao Kun and killed and 500 trade union members were either killed or fled. Trade union property was confiscated. Two staff members of the Gaobeidian Trade Union and Comrade Kang Jing, the President of the Zhending Branch, were arrested and were almost shot. Now, they are imprisoned by the Baoding army section for law enforcement. Staff members of the Zhangde trade union were put in prison while others fled, unable to go home. Hu Chuandao, an executive member of the Xinyang Branch, was forced to drive the engine but, because he refused, one of his arms was chopped off. He still did not give in. We do not know yet whether he died. In addition, Zhao Mi, a telegram student in Xinxiang, was arrested together with five Zhengzhou workers and sent to Baoding to be tortured cruelly. The stations to the south and north of Yancheng suffered the same disasters. It is a pity that there has been no detailed investigation and thus we are unable to provide a complete picture.