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Hard work, slow pay for workers left behind in boom

By Mary-Anne Toy Herald Correspondent in Beijing
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LI QUN spends 12 hours a day, seven days a week building the new China. She has not seen her three children, aged 13, seven and six, for more than a year.

She and her husband, Lu Shigui, left their village near the city of Nanchong, Sichuan province, for Beijing after a former villager told them they could earn 2000 yuan (\$330) a month if they joined him in the city on a construction site.

With the average farmer earning just over 3000 yuan a year, it was an offer too good to refuse. But a year later and their dreams of earning enough money to educate their children seem no closer.

They are owed almost a year's wages each, more than 40,000 yuan, and are unlikely to be able to travel home during spring festival, China's week-long holiday to mark the lunar new year, which began on Sunday.

Millions of the country's estimated 140 million migrant workers are owed wages ranging from a few months to more than a year. The official figure is at least 20 billion yuan.

The workers are the untidy side of the development boom that last week helped China leapfrog France and Britain to become the fourth biggest economy in the world when it announced its 2005 gross domestic product rose to 18.2 trillion yuan on the back of 9.9 per cent growth last year.

Ms Li and her husband's work team is one of dozens building China-View, a luxury retail-office development in Beijing's trendy Sanlitun area. On Wednesday workers held a brief public protest before being persuaded to disband by police and labour ministry officials who said they would be paid the following day.

The next day a line of anxious workers including Ms Li, 37, and Mr Lu, 38, queued up, trying, without luck, to get their money. On Friday the site was deserted.

When we rang the relevant municipal department the official directed us to the local department, which said it could not talk at all.

A spokeswoman for the Zhongguan Cun construction group said the company had paid all the salary money to the building contractor and it was up to the latter to pay the workers. The spokeswoman, who declined to give her name, said migrant workers were only paid at the end of the year because they had "bad habits" like drinking, and some even resorted to violence to get their money.

The central government is aware of the inequities and there are periodic crackdowns. Ironically, in Ms Li and Mr Lu's home province of Sichuan, authorities have been cracking down on wage defaulters.

A report last week said the city of Shenzhen had fined more than 1300 offending companies, getting back about 70 million yuan in back wages for workers since a crackdown that started in October.

Labour advocates say such crackdowns are merely set pieces to ease the consciences of the government and public.

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