

FOCUS



In the 'factory of the world', exhausted migrants are losing limbs every day, working on shoddy machines, with little training or safety oversight

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Ou Changqun's (歐昌群) right arm remains crooked after seven operations to reattach her forearm, which was torn off by a steel-spring punching machine two years ago.

Doctors grafted skin from the 31-year-old Sichuan (四川) migrant worker's thigh to her patch-work arm but there was not much they could do to fill a huge hole left by missing muscle. The mother of two will never forget the bloody scene when she and the severed arm were extracted from the machine in a factory in Foshan (佛山), Guangdong.

"I went into a coma due to excessive bleeding, and stayed in an intensive care unit for three days," Ou said. "I had not signed a labour contract with the factory owner and was not covered by statutory insurance for industrial injuries. The unscrupulous boss even suspended my medical treatment for more than a week and I was forced to petition outside the Foshan government in my hospital gown."

She said she told herself not to give up, but she worried about making a living with only one functioning arm. She had worked nine hours a day, six days a week, for four years, earning 2,000 yuan (HK\$ 2,470) a month. But her medical bill totalled 120,000 yuan. Her boss finally paid the bill and gave her compensation, but only after a 1½ years of arbitration and lawsuits.

Mainland labour activist He Xiaobo (何曉波), who lost three fingers in an industrial accident in Foshan in 2006, said Ou's story was typical of the millions of migrant workers who had been disabled in cities in Guangdong in



Machines in 'black factories' are obsolete and there's no skills training at all

CHRIS CHAN KING-CHI, CITY UNIVERSITY SOCIOLOGIST

more than three decades of economic reform and opening up.

"Among them, Dongguan (東莞) and Foshan have the most cases of serious industrial injury," He said. "There are huge surgical departments, especially for hand and arm reattachment surgery, at every township hospital in Dongguan."

He estimated at least 50,000 serious industrial injuries occurred in Foshan every year, more than triple the number acknowledged by the authorities.

Liu Kaiming (劉開明), director of the Shenzhen-based Institute of Contemporary Observation, said his research suggested that as many as 60,000 of the province's 30 million migrant workers were disabled by industrial accidents every year.

"The number of new disabled workers in Shenzhen is around 12,000 a year ... and the number of workers disabled across Guangdong should be around

40,000 to 60,000 a year because Shenzhen's economic output is a quarter of the province's," he said. "But even experienced labour rights experts have underestimated the serious work injury situation in Guangdong."

There are 8.2 million people who have been disabled by industrial accidents on the mainland, according to the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security. Many are from Guangdong – its provincial financial department said that last year the government had paid medical and living expense subsidies to 2.9 million affected people over the years, or more than a third of the national total.

Ministry figures show that more than 175,602 migrant were injured on the job in Guangdong in 2009, more than 18 per cent of the country's total for that year. Another 53,324 migrant workers recovering from workplace injuries underwent a medical assessment for their disability, down from 62,992 in 2008.

A doctor appointed by the social security fund will assess an injured worker to determine the severity of the injuries, and the finding is used to determine the amount of compensation the fund will pay to the person. But Hong Kong labour activists say the official tally only includes those who have signed agreements with their employer and gone through the assessments.

Chongqing (重慶) worker Mo Fangguo (莫芳國), who lost the palm of his left hand when it was caught in a stirring machine in a plastics factory in Dongguan's Humen township in July, said official statistics revealed only the tip of the iceberg. He had seen at least two people die and another four or five suffer serious injuries

at his factory, none of which were reported. "One worker died when he went inside an industrial packer to install a component but was squeezed to death when another worker unexpectedly started the machine," Mo, 48, said. "In peak seasons and summer, many untrained undergraduates are recruited to do exhausting assembly work, which easily leads to injury."

Dr Chris Chan King-chi, a sociologist at City University in Hong Kong, said his research suggested many of those injured worked in small or unregistered workshops, known as black factories, which are often just production lines in shabby rural homes. Most accidents in the places were not reported, and Chan agreed chronic fatigue from overwork made the work more dangerous. "Machines in black factories are obsolete and there's no skills training at all," he said.

Hubei (湖北) worker Li Jiangping (李江平) lost his entire right arm in a "black factory" in Shunde (順德) in June when it was flattened in a punching machine that lacked safety guards but exerted 300 tonnes of force. He said dozens of workers were disabled at the factory every year, but the owner was never sanctioned by the government's work safety watchdog.

Black-factory employees are not insured, and most bosses flee rather than pay medical fees if there is an injury on the job.

With so many workers losing hands or arms, hundreds of private and public hospitals specialising in hand surgery have arisen, recording large profits amid the high demand. Yu Wenxue (于文學), director of the privately owned Nanhai Hand and Foot Surgical Hospital on the outskirts of Foshan, said it received between 100 to 200 workers every day who have been injured on assembly lines. All the beds in its four-storey building were fully

booked the whole year.

"Ninety-nine per cent of our patients are migrant workers," Yu said.

The privately owned Shunde Heping Surgery Hospital nearby shows how fast the business can grow. In seven years it has expanded from 30 beds to 660, all housed in 150 million yuan, 13-storey complex with three hand-reattachment departments.

The hospital conducted 3,000 finger or hand reattachments in 2004, and the number has risen 25 per cent on average every year since then.

The cost of finger reattachment surgery at one Guangdong facility runs from 20,000 to 30,000 yuan. For serious cases such as palm or arm reattachments, which require multiple operations, workers must pay up to 150,000 yuan. Most factory workers earn about 1,800 yuan a month, but that includes overtime on top of long work hours.

For those injured workers can't pay the surgery fee, doctors just stop the bleeding and bandage up the person.

In Shenzhen, several hundred migrant workers crowd into the limb reattachment department of a public hospital in Longgang district. Half must sleep in the corridors because the wards are full.

One of those who can't get into a ward, a 17-year-old who lost a finger just a few weeks into her job at an umbrella factory, said she wasn't given any workplace safety training.

Cheng Weipeng (程維朋), who works for the Shenzhen Migrant Worker Centre – a labour rights organisation – said the surgical

The nightmare starts when parts of your body are amputated

CHENG WEIPENG, SHENZHEN MIGRANT WORKER CENTRE

departments of the 15 or so hospitals in Longgang were crowded with disabled workers.

"Some hand surgery hospitals co-operate with factory bosses and never give medical records to workers, making compensation lawsuits almost impossible," he said. "They also prohibit non-governmental organisations from entering the hospitals to educate workers."

Cheng, 23 and originally from Sichuan, lost the use of his own right arm four years ago when it was paralysed after getting caught in a polishing machine in Foshan. He said he had met more than 5,000 disabled migrant workers in the past four years.

"About three to five disabled migrant workers will turn up at our office every day," he said. "The most serious case I have seen is a Foshan worker who had both his legs amputated at the thigh after his legs were caught in a garbage packer. The nightmare starts when parts of your body are amputated."

Unscrupulous bosses may immediately stop paying your board expenses, deny medical treatment and try to force

workers to leave by ordering security guards to beat them up."

Zheng Guanghui (鄭廣輝), a sociologist at Sun Yat-Sen University, has conducted research on Guangdong's disabled migrant workers and workplace injuries for a decade. He said nothing had been done to improve their situation.

"Our research shows the problems of frequent industrial injuries and lax work safety standards haven't improved over the past decade," he said. "Rather than concealing the real statistics from the public, the government should confront the facts and tell people the price behind China's economic achievements and how many workers have shed blood for the cause of gross domestic product growth."

Lawyer Zhou Litai (周立太) began acting for disabled migrant workers in the mid-1990s and has taken part in more than 3,000 lawsuits. He once had to rent a farmer's house to provide free meals and accommodation to 200 penniless disabled migrant workers who had been driven out by factory owners. "More than 10,000 migrant workers lose their fingers and hands in Shenzhen's Baoan and Longgang districts each year," he said. "In the late 1990s, the labour laws only required factory owners to pay 33,000 yuan in compensation to a worker who lost his hand."

Compensation has since been raised to 400,000 to 500,000 yuan. But Zhou said workers willing to fight through the courts had to wait an average 1,074 days for their cases to be resolved.

Some lash out at their bosses. In 2009, a 26-year-old migrant worker from Guizhou (貴州), Liu Hanhuang (劉漢黃), who lost his right palm while on the job, stabbed two Taiwanese factory managers to death in Dongguan and injured a third after his boss refused to pay 170,000 yuan in court-ordered compensation.

With or without compensation, disabled migrant workers face similar fates. They can no longer do factory or farm work, and there's no training to enable them to fit into new jobs. Chen Yongfa (陳用發), a 32-year-old former migrant worker from Hunan who lost his right arm in an accident at a Shenzhen fabric factory when he was 20, is trying to change that.

He set up an experimental charity project, The Left-hander Soya Milk Shop, in collaboration with Oxfam in Shenzhen in 2009 to help disabled migrant workers earn a living by offering franchises, free training and interest-free loans.

He said he had to wage a three-year legal battle for compensation after his boss ran away. The experience turned him into a labour rights activist and he has visited more than 1,000 disabled workers in hospitals for Oxfam. However, Chen and employees from Oxfam's China office admit that most of the mainland's 8.2 million disabled workers will never receive such help.



Liang Jun, a printing worker, and Li Jiangping, an air-conditioner mechanic (top), were injured on the job in Foshan. Wang Goubin (above) lost fingers on his right hand in a factory accident in Shunde. Photos: K.Y. Cheng