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Foreign Correspondent: The Labours of Mr Zhang

Airs Tuesday July 19 at the earlier time of 9.20pm on ABC & iview

As China's economy stumbles, Matthew Carney taps into the anger of a growing mass of unemployed workers, and meets a labour activist who's risking his freedom to fight for their rights.

Matthew Carney is available for interviews.

Zhang Ziru has lost count of how many times he has been arrested. One week he remembers it was five times. He lives under constant police surveillance. He has moved away from his family to keep them safe.

Such are the occupational hazards for the labour activist who has helped organise some of China's biggest strikes.

"Even if I'm falsely accused of disrupting social order, it's just a matter of a three to five year jail sentence. I can accept that." – Zhang Ziru

These days Mr Zhang is busier than ever. His base is the fishing village-turned-boomtown Shenzhen, in China's south. But here too the economic slowdown is biting, with factories closing, jobs lost and wages cut.

Workers are pushing back. Last year there were nearly 3000 strikes in China – twice as many as in 2014, with a lot of them turning violent.

"I understand how hard and miserable it is to be a worker and how much unfairness they suffer." – Zhang Ziru

Mr Zhang is one of the last labour activists who have not been silenced. A self-taught lawyer and former shoe factory worker, he tries to work within China's opaque laws and stops short of calling for workers to rebel – but only just.

"The present Chinese Communist Party does not represent the interests of the majority of people, but the wealthy class." – Zhang Ziru

Mr Zhang gives China correspondent Matthew Carney rare access as he plays cat and mouse with authorities and shuttles between meetings with workers. He fears a collision between growing economic hardship and a rigid political system.

"If the existing system is not improved and the government fails to make political reform, the grievances and grudges will worsen and will explode." - Zhang Ziru

The government worries too, especially about the spectre of mass unemployment threatening its control. Millions are being laid off. One of them is Mr Yao, a coal miner forced into early retirement.

"The bosses exploit us. It's like the slave system. I ask, 'Why is the government so corrupted? Why can't it give us a good life and a stable job?'" – Mr Yao

Mr Yao is one of thousands of unemployed who hustle for work every day at an informal labour market in Shenyang, in China's north eastern rustbelt. Most get turned away.

When Matthew Carney films there he is surrounded by angry men – but their fury is not directed at him:

"The most corrupt dynasty in human history!"

"They say the happiness level of Chinese people is rising. Bullshit! Only by coming here could you know the reality of China!" – Man at the labour market

Matthew Carney explores the internal fallout from China's slowdown in "The Labours of Mr Zhang" - Foreign Correspondent 9.20pm Tuesday July 19 and 10.30am Thursday July 21 on ABC & iview, plus 6.30pm AEST Saturday July 23 on News 24.

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