

Student asks about Tiananmen Square

22 July 1998

Hi,

I'm doing my final year of school in Victoria, Australia. For history I am studying the Chinese revolution and in particular, the Tiananmen Square Massacre and whether it was a crisis of the revolution. While I have a fair idea of what occurred during the massacre, I have found it very difficult to find consistent information about the preceding events and trigger. This may be due to language barriers or the hereunto-secretive attitude of the Chinese government with their files and plans. What I want to find out is whether the Chinese gentry was an influence on the events at Tiananmen, given the age and essentially cultural differences between the leaders and the demonstrators. If you could help me in any way at all, I would be most obliged.

Thank you very much,

AD

P.S. -- The article on Deng Xiaoping was interesting and helpful.

Dear AD,

Thank you for your letter. We're glad you found the statement on the death of Deng Xiaoping helpful. As that statement draws out, in studying the events in China it is always necessary to examine the origins and class character of the Chinese revolution in 1949.

It is certainly true to say that the Tiananmen Square massacre was a crisis of the revolution, but what do we mean by that? Contrary to the presentation in the mass media, no doubt reflected in school history texts, the Chinese regime does not represent communism or socialism. It is a Stalinist bureaucracy implementing a capitalist program, enforcing cheap labour conditions against the Chinese workers on behalf of the transnational corporations.

The roots of this program lie in the foundations of the state established in 1949. It did not come to power through a working class revolution, but through the victory of the People's Liberation Army, which was

overwhelmingly peasant in its composition. Moreover, while Mao Zedong and the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party claimed to represent Marxism, their program was based on Stalin's perspective of establishing a national state and seeking coexistence with global capitalism.

Under his conception of a 'bloc of four classes,' Mao planned to form a 'New Democracy,' a capitalist state, in alliance with sections of the petty bourgeoisie and national bourgeoisie. Once the People's Liberation Army entered cities, strikes and other independent workers' struggles were routinely suppressed.

Mao's first government, a coalition with bourgeois and petty-bourgeois elements, corresponded to the Stalinist doctrine of a 'democratic stage' that was to last for several decades. It pledged to defend private property and even British and other imperialist interests, and postponed serious land reform. The Chinese Trotskyists, who opposed these policies and fought for the independent mobilisation of the working class, were murdered and thrown into prison by the hundreds at the hands of the Maoists, never to be released.

Through all the twists and turns of the Maoist regime -- such as the 'Great Leap Forward' of 1958, the 'Cultural Revolution' of 1966-69, the rapprochement with the United States in the 1970s and the turn to overt capitalist policies under Deng Xiaoping -- there was one common thread: hostility toward the development of a politically independent movement of the working class.

In the misnamed 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,' Mao, locked in a struggle with bureaucratic rivals, sought to mobilise support among the student youth and later elements of the lumpen proletariat and poor peasants who were organised in the so-called Red Guards. This movement encouraged peasant individualism, rejected economic planning, cut off supplies intended for the cities and denounced

virtually all culture and science as 'bourgeois'.

In the wake of the ensuing economic chaos, the Maoist leadership swung further to the right, establishing close ties with the US administration of Richard Nixon at the height of the Vietnam War, and restoring the authority of openly procapitalist elements, such as Deng Xiaoping (who later enunciated the slogan: 'To get rich is glorious'). Today, virtually all the land collectivised after 1949 has been restored to private ownership, restrictions on private ownership of industry have been largely dismantled and a massive penetration of foreign capital has been encouraged. The result has been levels of social inequality and misery unseen since the overthrow of the Kuomintang dictatorship of Chiang Kai-shek in 1949.

The roots of the Tiananmen Square massacre lie in the class tensions and unrest created by this process. The corruption denounced by students and workers was the most visible product of the conversion of ruling bureaucrats and their families into capitalist entrepreneurs and middlemen, at the expense of the conditions of millions of workers, poor peasants and students.

Initially, the protests involved students and middle class layers, largely espousing a procapitalist program. The Beijing bureaucracy displayed a conciliatory attitude to these elements, who included many of its own children, but shifted course violently when workers began to walk out of the factories, join the demonstrations and establish independent trade unions. The bloodbath of June 3-4, 1989 expressed the regime's organic fear of the working class.

The repression that followed also reflected this class difference. Student leaders and dissidents received jail terms, but workers who led strikes were summarily shot, sentenced to death or imprisoned for many years. By June 22, the bureaucracy revealed that 27 workers had been officially executed, but many more were killed.

Deng Xiaoping, Li Peng and their cronies denounced their victims as 'counterrevolutionaries' but the purpose of the terror was to intimidate the Chinese masses and crush all opposition to the regime's capitalist program. This is why figures like President George Bush of the US and Prime Minister Bob Hawke in Australia, while shedding crocodile tears for the victims of Tiananmen Square, preserved close relations with their Beijing

allies, clearing the way for the escalation of foreign investment.

The age gap and cultural differences that you ask about can only be understood within this context. Deng and his aging cohorts were the most conscious and practised Stalinist bureaucrats who survived of those who seized power with Mao in 1949. Their program (or 'culture' if you like), and that of their successors today, essentially consists of seeking to maintain the grip of the bureaucracy as the most reliable means of enforcing the requirements of global capitalism on the backs of the Chinese masses.

We hope you find these points useful. We would be interested in reading your conclusions. The issues you raise are connected to wider questions about the way history is taught (if at all) in the schools and universities. Generally, incidental factors, such as the age, sex or ethnic background of individual protagonists, are presented as crucial, denying the existence of underlying social factors. We are encouraging young people to study history more deeply and critically.

Yours sincerely,

The WSWWS Editorial Board

See Also:

Deng Xiaoping and the fate of the Chinese Revolution
[12 March 1997]



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