

Mass demonstrations in China express outrage at NATO bombing

Peter Symonds
10 May 1999

Hundreds of thousands of people took part in protests over the weekend in Beijing and cities across China against the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on Friday night. At least three people were killed in the bombing attack and another 20 people were injured. Those killed were journalists, including a newly-married couple-- Zhu Ying and her husband Xu Xinghu--who had been dispatching first-hand reports of the bombing's impact on daily life in Belgrade to the Beijing newspaper *Guangming Daily*.

In Beijing, the protests began early on Saturday afternoon. Thousands of students and staff from a dozen universities marched past the US and British embassies, carrying banners that read "Killer NATO," "Stop American aggression" and "Pay blood debts in blood". As the numbers swelled with organised contingents from separate institutions, the mood became angrier. Students began to pelt the embassy with rocks and water bottles, smashing windows and lights. Many stayed behind after dark, defying police orders to disperse, and smashing cars with US embassy numberplates. Others pushed against the lines of police ringing the embassies, shouting: "Don't you protect Americans".

The following morning, tens of thousands of students streamed into the centre of the capital and were joined by thousands of sympathetic onlookers, despite police attempts to hold them back. Hundreds of armed police manned every intersection in the area in an effort to contain the crowds heading into the embassy district. The protest swelled to an estimated 100,000, largest in Beijing since the anti-government movement of students and workers that was crushed in the Tiananmen Square massacre on June 4, 1989.

US ambassador to China James Sasser said in a television interview that he was concerned that Chinese

authorities could lose control. While his wife and son had been evacuated, Sasser said that he and other embassy staff had been unable to leave the grounds for more than 50 hours.

Large anti-US demonstrations erupted in other Chinese cities, including Hong Kong and Macao, revealing a widespread and deeply-felt revulsion at the NATO attack. In Chengdu in Sichuan province, the US Consulate was forced to evacuate all personnel after thousands of people stormed the grounds and set fire to the residence of the Consul-General, the reception area and computer room. Chinese authorities sent in 2,000 baton-wielding People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops to drive out the protestors.

In Guangzhou, about 10,000 people marched past the US Consulate, throwing bottles, burning American flags and chanting "Down with NATO". In Xian, an estimated 40,000 students and supporters gathered in an angry protest. Other demonstrations took place in Shanghai, Nanjing, Xiamen, Hangzhou, Nanning, Kunming, Hefei, Zhengzhou, Nanchang, Jinan, Dalian, Changchun, Lanzhou and Taiyuan. According to one overall estimate, more than 400,000 people took part.

The Beijing bureaucracy issued its own denunciations of the NATO bombing describing it as a "barbarian act" and accusing NATO of deliberately "spilling Chinese blood". But the size and determination of the anti-US demonstrations over the last two days has clearly come as a huge shock to the Chinese authorities, who are anxious to prevent the protests from becoming an avenue for venting wide ranging social and political discontent not just against the US and NATO but against the regime itself.

Vice-President Hun Jintao appeared on Chinese television on Sunday to warn that while legal protests against the bombing would be permitted, such activities

should proceed "from the fundamental interests of the nation and taking the overall situation into account". Protesters should "carry out the activities in good order and in accordance with law". He called on demonstrators to avoid taking "extremist action" and guard against those who wanted to take advantage of the situation to destroy the social order. Several members of the outlawed China Democracy Party were rounded up on Sunday morning and ordered to stay away from the protests.

As the slogans reveal, the outrage of the protestors is not directed simply at the attack on the Chinese Embassy but expresses far broader concerns about the NATO war against Yugoslavia. Even before the embassy bombing took place, a Chinese Internet chat room about the Balkans conflict had been deluged with anti-US messages. The war has undoubtedly struck a deep chord with many Chinese people who are outraged at NATO's relentless aerial bombardment of a tiny country and are fearful that what is being done to Yugoslavia may in the future be carried out against China.

At the same time, the demonstrations are taking place in a highly volatile political atmosphere within China itself. Economic growth rates have been slowing, unemployment has been growing rapidly, and millions more workers face retrenchment as the Chinese bureaucracy prepares to shut down hundreds of state-owned enterprises over the next two years. Among broad layers of the population in China and throughout Asia, there is undoubtedly a deep sense of injustice and resentment at the economic restructuring policies, which are closely identified with the demands of the US administration and the International Monetary Fund.

Ten years ago the students who took over Tiananmen Square were calling for democratic reforms and many looked sympathetically to the US for support. But as one student told reporters over the weekend: "Now we hate America. China has been especially friendly to the American people. But we have been rebuffed and now the Americans have broken international law." Another protestor said: "As a young Chinese, I've always felt a very friendly attitude toward the US and its people. But now I feel a deep internal disgust and anger."

The demonstrations not only coincide with the lead-up to the 10th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square

massacre, only three weeks away, but come just a week after the 80th anniversary of the May 4 movement which erupted against the post World War I carve-up of China by the major imperialist powers. Those protests in 1919 began with a march by students from Beijing University to Tiananmen Square, demanding democratic reforms and an end to imperialist oppression. The historical parallels will not be lost on by those taking part in anti-US demonstrations today.

The outpouring of opposition in the streets of Beijing and other cities is an event of great significance. It demonstrates that the NATO war against Yugoslavia is having far reaching and unforeseen consequences as it intersects with a deepening economic and social crisis affecting broad layers of people in country after country around the world. NATO's bombing of a defenceless nation is engendering a sense of injustice that is certain to have a broad and long lasting impact on world politics.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact