

Chinese police dragnet marks 15 years since the Tiananmen Square massacre

John Chan
12 June 2004

This year marked the 15th anniversary of the brutal repression of anti-government protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. Hundreds, if not thousands, of unarmed Chinese students and workers were killed when the Stalinist bureaucracy headed by Deng Xiaoping broke up the mass demonstrations with tanks and troops.

A decade and a half later, none of the issues that sparked the protests have been resolved and the Beijing leadership remains deeply fearful of any signs of political unrest. In the leadup to the anniversary, the Chinese authorities mobilised the full force of the state apparatus, particularly in Beijing, to prevent any public observance to mark the tragic events.

In the past three months, some 16,000 Internet cafes across the country have been shut down to prevent them being used to organise demonstrations. Some 10,000 members from paramilitary police units specialising in suppressing urban riots were called into an unprecedented training session in Beijing. In addition, ministerial officials in the capital were ordered to watch a documentary justifying the 1989 crackdown.

Across China, dozens of leading dissidents were rounded up. According to the BBC, former military surgeon Jiang Yanyong, who exposed the official cover-up of the SARS epidemic last year, was one of those arrested. He wrote a letter to the top Chinese leadership in February calling for a reassessment of the Tiananmen events. Ding Zilin, the leader of "Tiananmen mothers"—an organisation of women who lost their sons or husbands in 1989—told the media that she was under 24-hour police surveillance.

On June 4, extra police, including armed paramilitary units, were on duty in Tiananmen Square. Plain-clothes security officials moved among the crowds. The media reported that at least 16 people were seized by police and dragged away. An Associated Press photographer was detained briefly for photographing the arrests. CNN broadcasts to the major hotels and apartment blocks for foreigners were repeatedly blacked out when footage was shown of the 1989 crackdown.

The only major protest to mark the Tiananmen Square events occurred place in Hong Kong where between 50,000 and 80,000 people took part in a candlelight rally at Victoria Park. The gathering was the largest in years, reflecting continuing anger over the 1989 repression, as well as mounting hostility to Beijing's anti-democratic moves in the former British colony.

Protesters, many of them dressed in funereal black or white,

carried placards and banners, declaring "Remember June 4", "Return power to people" and "March on July 1". On July 1 last year, more than half a million people protested in Hong Kong against attempts to introduce repressive new security laws. Another protest is planned on the same day this year to demand democratic reforms.

Many of those at the rally openly wept when footage of the Tiananmen Square massacre was shown on a large screen. The crowd then began chanting slogans demanding an end to Beijing's dictatorial rule and the release of detained dissidents.

Significantly, a number of people from mainland China took part in the rally. A man from Wuxi commented to the *Los Angeles Times*: "Fabulous! It's just wonderful. I'll tell my relatives and friends once I get back, and they will tell others too, I'm sure." An office manager from Guizhou province told the *Washington Post*: "In China, I had only heard about the [Tiananmen Square] incident. Hong Kong people are lucky. They can know the truth... I admire their courage."

The comments underscore the fears in Beijing that political agitation over democratic rights in Hong Kong will spill over onto the mainland. A Chinese source, who spoke with former president Jiang Zemin when he toured Guangdong province in February, told the *Washington Post*: "They are afraid of democracy in Hong Kong. They're afraid if people in the mainland see that Hong Kong can elect its own leaders, they will ask why they can't do the same."

Since the July 1 mass protest last year, Chinese authorities have taken a series of measures to intimidate the Hong Kong population. In late April, Beijing ruled out any direct election for the post of chief executive in 2007 and, in a show of force, sailed eight warships into Hong Kong harbour. Three popular and outspoken radio commentators have resigned over the last month, saying they had received death threats. Hong Kong residents have reported receiving phone calls from relatives on the mainland—apparently after official intimidation—urging them to vote for pro-Beijing parties in the Legislative Council elections in September.

Fifteen years after Western leaders shed crocodile tears for the dead in Tiananmen Square, any remaining restrictions on doing business in China are being rapidly lifted. The European Union (EU) has announced that it will lift its arms embargo imposed on China after the 1989 events. The US recently rejected calls for economic sanctions based on claims that the wages of Chinese

workers were being artificially repressed. Together with the EU, the US is considering declaring China to be a “market economy”—a move that would effectively end 200 anti-dumping cases against China.

In brushing aside the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the claim is made that the market economy in China will inevitably bring democracy. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas D. Kristof summed up the argument: “So, 15 years after Tiananmen, we can see the Communist dynasty fraying. The aging leaders of 1989 who ordered the crackdown won the battle but lost the war: China is no longer a Communist nation in any meaningful sense... after the Chinese could watch Eddie Murphy, wear tight pink dresses and struggle over what to order at Starbucks, the revolution is finished. No middle class is content with more choices of coffees than of candidates on a ballot.”

The first point that has to be made is that China was never socialist or communist. Mao Zedong established a regime, based on his peasant armies, that was hostile to the working class from the outset. Its highly regulated national economy, based on the nationalisation of key industries, was akin to that of many so-called Third World countries such as India. Like all forms of national economic regulation, the insulated Chinese economy was completely undermined by the processes of integrated global production.

The initial opening of the Chinese economy to international capital in the 1970s became a flood after the events of Tiananmen Square. The crackdown was aimed not so much at the students but the workers who began to join the protests in droves to voice their class grievances over growing unemployment and poverty. International capital recognised the signal: the Stalinist bureaucracy was prepared to do whatever was necessary to ensure there would be no opposition to capitalist exploitation.

Far from creating the conditions for democracy, the last decade and a half of “market reforms” has only deepened the immense social gulf between the ruling elite and the vast bulk of the population. While it is certainly true that a small, relatively well-off middle class has been created, it has been at the expense of millions of workers who have lost their jobs and tens of millions of farmers who face increasing taxes, falling prices and a lack of basic services. As the measures in force on June 4 testify, the Beijing bureaucracy is terrified of allowing the Chinese masses any genuine political say or democracy rights.

China’s booming coastal regions depend on the continuing massive inflow of foreign direct investment, which in turn requires a ready supply of a cheap, regimented labour. Facing unemployment, lack of welfare and appalling poverty, millions have been driven from the countryside and old industrial areas to seek work in the new sweatshops, where all the evils of primitive capitalist accumulation are evident. Excessive hours, inadequate safety, non-payment of wages, forced peonage and physical intimidation are all enforced by an extensive system of police state repression.

The privileged Beijing bureaucracy, which is busy integrating itself with the emerging Chinese capitalist class, is well aware that it is sitting atop a social time bomb. The working class has almost trebled in size from 120 million in 1978 to 350 million in 2000.

All the grievances that led to the 1989 protests have only intensified over the past 15 years. There is a common saying today among the Chinese masses: “After decades of bitterness, things are what they were before Liberation [in 1949].”

The same fears are felt in international ruling circles. At a poverty reduction conference in Shanghai in May, World Bank President James Wolfensohn bluntly warned that China’s growing social unrest would lead to a political explosion. He urged China’s rich to build a bridge to “the underclass”. “That way,” he said, “unlike the French [aristocrats], you will not be taken to the guillotine on July 14.”

The June 10 issue of *Far Eastern Economic Review* pointed to the extent of existing social discontent. According to the magazine, at least 10 million people took part in protests in China last year over lay-offs, official corruption or rural tax burdens. The central government received 600,000 individual petitions complaining of social injustices.

The *International Herald Tribune* reported on June 3 that recent Chinese police statistics show demonstrations by workers and peasants rose from 8,700 in 1993 to 32,000 in 1999—an increase of 268 percent—and reached 40,000 in 2000. Sichuan, China’s largest province, witnessed a growth in protests of almost 20 percent last year. In northeast China, where large sections of state-owned industries have been downsized or shut, there were 9,559 protests involving more than 863,000 people between January 2000 and September 2002.

The newspaper noted: “For China’s stability, a greater concern than these raw numbers is the changing style of protest. Police concede the demonstrators are gradually outgrowing the deliberately small-scale, self-contained tactics they adopted in 1990s to avoid repression. Protests are expanding in average size, becoming more organised and confrontational, and increasingly link demonstrators from several workplaces or neighbourhoods.”

The real lesson of the past 15 years is that the expansion of the capitalist market in China has not brought democratic rights and decent living standards but the opposite. Workers, intellectuals and others seeking a means of waging a political fight against the oppressive rule of the Beijing bureaucracy and the misery of capitalist exploitation need to turn to the international Trotskyist movement, which alone has conducted a continuous struggle for genuine socialism against all the crimes and betrayals of Stalinism in China and elsewhere.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact