

Anti-Japanese protests and the reactionary nature of Chinese nationalism

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Three weeks of anti-Japanese protests in China were brought to a halt last weekend when Beijing stepped in to shut them down. After giving tacit support to the demonstrations, the Chinese leadership declared that the protests had become a threat to social stability and dispatched police to prevent any continuation. A handful of protesters detained by police over violent incidents were paraded in the media as a warning to others.

The protests grew out of a widespread Internet campaign against granting Japan a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Tokyo deliberately inflamed the situation by giving official approval for a school history textbook that whitewashes the crimes of the Japanese imperialist armies in the 1930s and 1940s. In response to spreading protests, the Japanese government provocatively demanded an apology from Beijing and compensation for damage to Japanese property in China.

Like Japan, China has been deliberately stirring up nationalism both to divert attention away from huge social tensions at home and to justify a more prominent role for itself in the region and internationally. The Beijing bureaucracy's decision to clamp down on the protests was motivated, firstly, by concerns over the economic impact of continuing tensions and, secondly, by fears that the demonstrations might become a focal point for broader social concerns by workers and farmers.

As it was, the protests were largely dominated by better-off layers of young people—the sons and daughters of the emerging Chinese middle class—and slogans that were openly racist and chauvinist in character. Insofar as the demonstrations were critical of the Chinese leadership at all, it was that Beijing had not been sufficiently strenuous in defending China's national interests.

There is nothing in any way progressive about marches and protests in which participants scream that they “hate Japanese” and carry placards declaring “Kill all Japanese pigs”. One of the Chinese web sites calling for further demonstrations called itself *Japanesepig.com*. Along with stoning of Japanese stores, incidents were reported of protesters assaulting Japanese workers and students.

The anti-working class character of the call for a boycott of Japanese goods was illustrated by a mobile text message that read: “If Chinese people didn't buy Japanese goods for one day, 1,000 Japanese companies would go bankrupt. If they didn't buy Japanese goods for six months, half the Japanese people would lose their jobs; if they didn't buy Japanese goods for a year, the Japanese economy would collapse. Send this on to other Chinese people and we won't need to go to war!”

Many Chinese people are legitimately angry at the falsification of Japanese wartime atrocities. But to blame all Japanese for the crimes of Japanese imperialism is as absurd and reactionary as to blame all Germans for the crimes of the Nazis. The militarist regime in Tokyo only maintained its hold on power in the 1930s and 1940s through the ruthless suppression of all political opposition, particularly among the Japanese working class.

In Japan, bitter memories of the war have resulted in a pronounced opposition to war and any attempt to revive the symbols of militarism.

The efforts of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to whip up right-wing nationalism are in part aimed at overcoming widespread popular opposition to attempts to modify or remove the so-called pacifist clause in the country's constitution. A majority of Japanese people strongly opposed Koizumi's decision to send troops to support the US occupation of Iraq.

Far from making an appeal to Japanese workers and youth for unity against war, militarism and exploitation, the anti-Japanese protests helped to drive a wedge between the working people of the two countries. The degree to which the Beijing bureaucracy was directly involved is still not clear. But at the very least, the Chinese police, who are notorious for cracking down on any protests, gave the demonstrators considerable leeway.

One of the most prominently reported protests took place outside the Japanese consulate in Shanghai on April 16. The official news agency Xinhua not only covered the demonstration but put the attendance at 100,000—widely regarded as a gross exaggeration. Although riot police kept protestors away from the consulate, they stood and watched as the crowd threw eggs and stones at the building. Some of the police held pre-prepared signs helpfully stating “March route this way”.

Not all of those involved were openly racist. Web sites such as *China918.net*, named after the Japanese annexation of Manchuria on September 18, 1931, for instance, appealed to protestors to oppose only “right-wing forces in Japan and politicians who support them, not Japanese people and friends”. At the same time, however, the site appealed to its readers to obey Beijing's call for the “rational and legal” expression of views and to appreciate the “police and paramilitary police fighters defending the students' patriotic fervour”.

Numerous articles have appeared comparing the current anti-Japanese protests to the mass student movement that erupted on May 4, 1919. Some of today's protestors claim to draw inspiration from those events. But there is a huge gulf between the ideological outlook that inspired the May 4 movement and that which dominated the recent anti-Japanese protests.

The classical Chinese nationalism of Sun Yat-sen had a certain progressive content. As a new ideology brought from the West, it made a direct appeal to the oppressed masses to overthrow the decrepit Manchu dynasty, free China from imperialist domination, unify the country and create a democratic republic. Sun was compelled to issue limited social demands, including for land reform.

The shortcomings of Sun and his Nationalist Party were rapidly exposed following the 1911 revolution that brought the collapse of the Manchu empire. In order to secure foreign recognition, Sun refused to mobilise the masses against the remnants of the imperial armies in northern China and failed to redistribute land to the peasantry. The inability of Sun to implement his program revealed the organic incapacity of the Chinese bourgeoisie to complete the basic democratic and national tasks carried out by the classic American and European bourgeois revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Chinese intellectuals, who were critical of the consequences of 1911, were profoundly influenced by the Russian Revolution of 1917 and many turned to Marxism to find a progressive road forward. All of these ideological elements were evident in the movement that erupted following World War I. The decision by the victorious powers in Paris to hand Germany's colonial concessions in China to Japan provoked a wave of disillusion and outrage. Although there were many currents in the May 4 protest movement, it was infused with a hostility to all imperialist powers and the existing social order in China. The most farsighted elements went on to found the Chinese Communist Party in 1921.

The founding principles of the Communist Party—socialist internationalism—were betrayed by Stalinism with tragic consequences for the Second Chinese Revolution of 1925-27 and for the evolution of the regime installed by Mao Zedong in 1949. Born out of the defeats of 1927, Mao's leadership adopted a nationalist policy, echoing Stalin's program of "socialism in one country". By 1972, Mao had ditched his empty anti-imperialist rhetoric and reached a rapprochement with the US and Japan.

This turn was the beginning of China's embrace of foreign capital and the open market policies which accelerated after Mao's death in 1976. Now, 86 years after the May 4 Movement, all the social evils of "Old China" have returned: sweatshop conditions, child labour, rural poverty, official corruption and chronic unemployment as well as drug addiction and prostitution.

The recent protests were not motivated by hostility to imperialism, oppression or social inequality. What guided them was the Chinese nationalism that has been promoted and encouraged by the bankrupt Stalinist bureaucracy that still holds power in Beijing. As it abandoned its socialist pretences, the Chinese leadership has increasingly relied on nationalism as a means for creating a social base for its continued rule.

The emphasis on "patriotic education" is all-pervasive in school textbooks, the media, in literature and on official occasions. Chinese officials no longer pretend to be building socialism or communism but instead hail the regime in Beijing for ending the "humiliation" of China following the Opium War of 1840 and reviving the imperial glories of the "Middle Kingdom".

Beijing has pointed to the gross historical distortions contained in Japanese school history books. But Chinese textbooks reek of Chinese nationalism and are every bit as putrid as their counterparts in Japan. They deliberately falsify the entire record of the Communist Party going back to Stalin's betrayal of the 1925-27 revolution and cover up for its crimes, including the widespread suffering caused by the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and the bloody massacre of workers and students in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Beijing's nationalism appeals to a definite social stratum: a young, relatively affluent layer that has directly benefitted from the huge flood of foreign capital into China in the 1990s and those who aspire to join its ranks. Their social position has been enhanced at the expense of tens of millions of workers who labour in atrocious conditions or who have been thrown out of work as state-owned enterprises have been sold off or shut down.

This emerging middle class is either ignorant or contemptuous of the impoverished urban and rural masses and regards its future as bound up with the further expansion of Chinese capitalism. They support the Communist Party precisely because it has nothing to do with socialism and is dedicated to augmenting the economic and political position of China against its rivals.

Lu Yunfei, a 25-year-old computer engineer in Beijing, who operated a leading anti-Japanese web site, the "Chinese Patriotic Alliance", is representative. As described by the BBC: "Lu is typical of the new generation of young, urban Chinese. He has a good job, good income, and more personal freedom than any previous generation. He is too young to remember the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. Instead his

experience is of the boom times of the 1990s. He is grateful to the Communist Party, and deeply patriotic."

Chinese nationalism also expresses the outlook of sections of capitalist elite that are frustrated at the dominance of foreign capital and transnational corporations in many industries. China's chief negotiator for World Trade Organisation entry, Long Yongtu, urged Chinese firms at a business forum in Hainan last year to accept a "bottom" position in the hierarchy of global production and "work hard for others" for two more decades.

Many aspiring entrepreneurs, however, are not prepared to wait for two decades and demand that Beijing take action to advance Chinese capitalism. The sentiment is reflected in the slogan "Rejuvenate China and raise our national prestige" which was widespread in the anti-Japanese protests. It is not surprising the calls for a boycott of Japanese goods were promoted by the China Chain Store and Franchise Association.

At the same time, Beijing is deeply hostile to the involvement of workers in the protests. On April 16, 2,000 workers at the Japanese electronic firm, Taiyo Yuden, in Dongguan went on strike over low wages, burnt Japanese flags and smashed windows. The police backed by armoured vehicles were immediately called in to suppress the protest. The following day 3,000 police arrested around 1,000 anti-Japanese protesters in the nearby Shenzhen Special Economic Zone—they were workers, rather than students.

The danger for the Chinese leadership of workers protesting against the oppressive conditions in Japanese corporations is that strikes and demonstrations will broaden to focus on the sweatshop methods employed in other companies—foreign and Chinese—and will draw in other social layers including the urban poor, the unemployed and the rural masses. Fearful of the danger of "social instability," Beijing clamped down on workers' protests and then finally ended the demonstrations altogether.

The class hostility of the Chinese regime underscores the fact that the workers in China, Japan and internationally share common class interests. Well over a decade of economic restructuring in Japan has led to the highest levels of unemployment in the postwar period and a growing gulf between rich and poor. Chinese and Japanese workers are often oppressed by exactly the same companies. By 2004, Japanese corporations had poured \$US66.6 billion in investment into China, making it Japan's largest trade partner. Mitsui, for instance, has more than 110 joint-ventures in China. Matsushita, Panasonic's parent company, runs 49 plants. Japanese firms now employ 9.2 million Chinese workers.

Even to fight for basic rights and conditions, Chinese workers have to reject the nationalist demagoguery propagated by the Beijing bureaucracy and unify with their class brothers and sisters in Japan and internationally. Such a struggle inevitably raises the necessity of refashioning society along socialist lines, which in China means a political offensive against the Stalinist bureaucracy in Beijing which betrayed the fundamental principles of socialism decades ago.



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