

Chinese government imposes nationwide military training for students

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A Students Military Training Work Regulation jointly issued by China's ministry of education, the general staff headquarters and the general political department of the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) on April 21 will formalise military training throughout the country's high schools and universities.

On paper, China already has a system of conscription requiring all citizens aged 18-22 to carry out 24 months of military service. In practice, Beijing has never enforced the draft as the PLA has always been able to recruit enough volunteers from peasant youth, desperate to get out of the impoverished countryside. Young people seeking to enter tertiary education have been exempt from military service.

Increasingly, the Chinese leadership has sought to transform the PLA into a smaller hi-tech force. However, the purpose of the student training program is not primarily to attract more educated recruits. Last year the PLA enlisted only 10,000 university students throughout the country. The overriding aim is political, rather than military, and reflects deep concerns in the Beijing bureaucracy about the potential for rebellion among the new generation of Chinese youth.

A significant component of the military training is ideological. The stated aim is "to allow students to grasp basic military skills and theory, and enhance their understanding of defence and the consciousness of national security". The plan is to strengthen the submission of students to "organisation" and "discipline", as well as to instill the values of "patriotism", "collectivism" and "revolutionary heroism".

The new policy calls for an expansion of defence courses and professional military staff on tertiary campuses. In each high school, at least one director must be appointed in charge of the military training. Education departments will establish a system of joint offices with the PLA to direct school military training. The new

military training will be compulsory for all high school and college students, and their performance will be part of their education records.

The regulation calls for a national campaign of student military training to be held every five years. Each province must hold a major training seminar every 3-5 years. Every other aspect of education in China is subject to the market principle of "user pays". Student military training, however, is to be financed by the government and the PLA—an indication that it has top priority. Any charge on students is strictly prohibited.

The state media has promoted the new policy as a positive step to "steel" young people, who have supposedly been spoiled as the single child of their urban parents. In reality, it is not the impact of the one-child policy that the Stalinist leadership fears, but the vast social changes that have take place over the past 30 years as a result of its open embrace of capitalist market reform.

Under Mao Zedong, the Chinese bureaucracy had virtually total control over every aspect of the media and culture, right down to the drab uniform-style of clothes to be worn. The cult of Mao accompanied by patriotic propaganda and false claims to be socialist were designed to drown out any opposition and stifle "foreign" influences. Moreover, the whole population was dependent on the state bureaucracy for everything from a job to health care, pensions and education.

By opening up China to foreign investment and private enterprise, Beijing has unleashed vast economic and social forces over which it no longer has any direct control. Young people do not rely on the official media but have access to the Internet and a vast array of ideas and cultural trends. According to official statistics, China's registered Internet users increased 23.4 percent last year to 137 million—the world's second largest user population after the US. Most are aged between 18 and 24.

At the same time, market reforms have created a deepening social divide and great uncertainty. School and college leavers are no longer assured of a job and large numbers are unemployed. Tens of millions of young workers are compelled to move from place to place to look for work. Those who have some money are able to purchase mobile phones, a range of clothes, jewelry, motorbikes and other paraphernalia. Discontent and alienation have produced a disparate variety of reactions among different layers of young people.

Such tendencies often come as a shock to the regime. For example, in 2005 in Mao's hometown in Hunan province, a television station organised a "Super Girls" contest—copied from "American Idol"—that drew an audience of 400 million throughout China on one night. Some eight million viewers—mostly young people—sent text messages to "vote" for their favourite. The three finalists, all in their early 20s, suddenly became national celebrities. Li Yuchun from Sichuan, who flaunted a tomboy look, eventually won.

The central state-run CCTV issued a statement denouncing the show as "vulgar and manipulative" and threatened to shut it down. The Chinese leadership is fearful that any movement with a vaguely anti-establishment edge, even one that is completely apolitical, can become a danger. Wei Feng, a student from the Beijing Foreign Language Institute told *Seattle Times*: "The whole thing is about singing whatever you want, and millions of young girls in those provinces have never had that chance before." Some 120,000 girls took part in the contest.

The government has tried to channel the alienation among youth in the reactionary direction of nationalism and patriotism. In 2005, it deliberately encouraged anti-Japanese protests by Fenqing or "angry youth" over a proposal to grant a permanent UN Security Council seat to Japan and Tokyo's support for history books covering up Japan's wartime crimes. The mainly middle class youth shouted racist slogans, attacked Japanese businesses and beat up Japanese visitors. Beijing had to eventually shut down the demonstrations as the rampage threatened to get out of control.

Beijing's greatest fear is a movement infused with socially progressive ideas against social inequality and state repression. Already the high costs of education and pervasive unemployment among school graduates have led to a wave of protests and riots. The "market reform" of the 1990s ended the longstanding guarantee of a job for university graduates in state-owned enterprises. Like

students in other countries, Chinese students are no longer part of the privileged elite, but a pool of cheap skilled labour for employers.

In 2006, of the 4.13 million university and college graduates, one in three could not find a job. At a state council meeting about university graduates on April 25, senior government officials admitted that student unemployment was likely to be more severe in 2007. The number of China's tertiary graduates will reach 4.95 million this year—an increase of 820,000 from 2006.

The hardships facing university students are a direct product of the regime's pro-market education reforms. In the past decade, university tuition costs increased exponentially to between 5,000 and 8,000 yuan (\$US640-\$1,000) a year. In a country where average per capita income is less than \$2,000, the financial burdens of education for working families are huge.

Beijing is acutely conscious of the explosive potential of these social tensions. Chinese leaders are also aware that political movements among students have historically indicated a broader radicalisation among working people. The Chinese Communist Party emerged out of the May Fourth Movement of 1919 among students and intellectuals—itself a response to the Russian Revolution.

The CCP abandoned the principles of socialist internationalism in the late 1920s, but it still celebrates May 4 as the Youth Day each year. It is, however, a ritual that buries the real meaning of the May Fourth Movement. The rebellious "new youth" of 1919 who were determined to change the course of history in China and the world, have been replaced with images of regimented, mindless, patriotic young people absolutely submissive to the authorities.

In 1989, the Chinese leadership ordered the PLA to send heavily armed troops and tanks to brutally crush the protests of workers and students in Tiananmen Square for basic democratic rights and decent living standards. Its decision to implement a nationwide program of student military training is one rather desperate attempt at staving off the inevitable eruption of young people again.



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