

# Mass Hong Kong vigil marks Tiananmen massacre

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An estimated 150,000 people turned out at Hong Kong's Victoria Park on June 4 to commemorate the anti-government protestors who were killed in Beijing's Tiananmen Square 20 years ago. After years of decline, the size of the crowd returned to the level when the first vigil was held in 1990. Another 50,000 were unable to enter the park.

On June 4, 1989, 1.5 million people or one fourth of Hong Kong's population, turned out in the streets in response to the Tiananmen massacre. Like workers throughout China they were outraged by the military repression that killed hundreds, if not thousands, of protestors in Beijing.

After the former British colony was returned to China in 1997, the annual commemorations of the massacre became a vehicle for demanding democratic rights and social justice in Hong Kong, threatening to inspire a larger movement throughout China. Beijing has continued to put off its 1997 promise to allow direct elections for Hong Kong's chief executive and full parliamentary elections.

Last month, Beijing's handpicked chief executive, Donald Tsang, called on Hong Kong citizens to make an "objective assessment" of the Tiananmen massacre. "I understand Hong Kong people's feelings about June 4, but the incident happened many years ago. The country's development in many areas has since achieved tremendous results and brought economic prosperity to Hong Kong," Tsang declared in the Legislative Council.

Tsang's argument is that China's rapid economic expansion in the past 20 years and its impact on Hong Kong sufficiently justify Beijing's brutal repression. Yet the boom was based on subjugating the Chinese working class as super-exploited cheap labour for the benefit of a wealthy elite. After the Tiananmen massacre, foreign investment flooded into China confident that their profits would be secure.

Amid a public uproar, Tsang, who is speaking for definite business interests, was forced to apologise over the comments. Hong Kong enterprises employ some 10 million low-wage workers in China. Hong Kong's financial and trading industries are dependent on the inflows of foreign capital into, and exports of goods from, China. The territory has become a major financial centre for Chinese corporations to raise capital.

At the vigil, Tsang's image was shown on a giant screen—next to

former Chinese Premier Li Peng who ordered the military crackdown in 1989. A placard held by an old man reading "Donald Tsang, your conscience has been eaten by dogs" sparked prolonged cheers from the crowds. Many wept when wreaths were laid before a makeshift "memorial to the martyrs".

A recent poll conducted by the University of Hong Kong found that 61 percent of the population wanted Beijing to revise its verdict of the 1989 protests as "counter-revolutionary riots"—a sharp rise from 49 percent last year. A poll conducted by *Ming Po* newspaper at the vigil showed that 46 percent were attending for the first time, and significantly, most were young people born after 1989.

A *South China Morning Post* editorial noted that parents were educating their children not to forget the democratic and social aspirations behind the June 4 protests: "For Hong Kong people who lived through the Tiananmen Square crackdown, there is a growing awareness of the vital importance not just for them, but for their children and grandchildren, to remember June 4."

The editorial also warned of pent-up anger: "On the political front, the massive turnout will galvanise the political sentiments of the populace. Scenes of late comers waiting to enter a packed Victoria Park on Thursday were reminiscent of the July 1 rally in 2003."

In July 2003, half a million people protested against the former chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, over a proposed draconian anti-subversion law, introduced on behalf of Beijing. Amid an economic downturn and worsening social inequality, the Beijing-selected Tung became a target of public hostility, forcing him to step down two years later. The *South China Morning Post* is worried that Tsang could face a similar political crisis.

Large protests are expected again on July 1, driven by anger over rising unemployment. Hong Kong's GDP shrank by 7.8 percent on annualised basis in the first quarter of 2009, signalling a downturn far worse than during the impact of Asian financial crisis in 1997-98.

The organisers of the vigil, led by the opposition Democratic Party and its allies, have no answer to the burning issues facing the working people. While demanding direct elections in Hong Kong, they repeat the lie that the Tiananmen Square massacre was a "communist" government's repression of a "democracy movement". In fact, the Chinese regime was never socialist and communist, and the massacre was aimed primarily at suppressing the working class opposition to

Beijing's market reforms.

The vigil organisers hailed the late Chinese Communist Party (CCP) general secretary, Zhao Ziyang, as the spiritual leader of the "democracy movement". Zhao backed the students' demands for democratic reforms in order to accelerate the reintroduction of a capitalist market and to build a base among the middle-classes against the working class.

## Repression in China

Hong Kong, because of its status as a Special Administrative Region, was the only place in China where people could express relatively freely their sentiments on June 4. The mass turnout at the vigil is an indication of the popular, but heavily suppressed, discontent throughout China.

Within China, extraordinary police-state measures were implemented to prevent any public commemoration of the massacre. The CCP is well aware that social contradictions today are far more explosive than before 1989. With unemployment rising as a result of the global financial crisis, all the social tensions that were stifled by rapid economic growth over the past two decades can easily be ignited.

Police sealed off Tiananmen Square. Students in Beijing had been warned by the police not to speak to foreign media. To keep students away from politics, university exams were scheduled across China on or around June 4. Political dissidents were forced to move out of Beijing during the anniversary. In Guizhou province, a seminar planned for June 4 to discuss human rights was shut down by police, who also arrested the organisers.

The political repression had begun earlier. Zhang Shijun, a former soldier who took part in the 1989 repression, was placed under house arrest after he published an open letter to President Hu Jintao in March, calling for an official reassessment of the protest movement. Like many troops at the time, Zhang was sympathetic to the protesting workers and students. Obviously traumatised by the experience, he told Associated Press: "I feel like my spirit is stuck there on the night of June 3." Zhang called other former soldiers to step forward and tell the truth of the murderous repression.

Using the pretext of suppressing violent and pornographic content, the Chinese regime is conducting a crackdown of illegal Internet sites from June 1 to September 30. The real aim is to prevent youth from gaining access to critical political ideas and information. From July 1, all PCs sold in China must have government-developed internet-filtering software to block banned content.

The bureaucratic censorship of Internet users, who now number 300 million in China, will be futile. In the popular *Tianya* forum, for example, bloggers commemorated the Tiananmen massacre without directly mentioning it. They used other events with "64" (June 4),

"20" (years), or "massacre" in order to evade the censorship. For instance, there were references to "1964: Australian Aborigines celebrated winning electoral rights" and "20 years since meeting my first love," as well as the Japanese army's 1937 Nanjing massacre.

Hong Kong's *Ming Bao* noted that while "on the surface, every message bears no relation to the June 4 event, in fact, those messages that saturated the frontage expressed a strong consciousness of resistance".

By contrast, the international bourgeoisie backed away from using the Tiananmen massacre to posture as champions of "democracy", so as not to challenge the regime's measures to keep the working class under control. US secretary of state Hillary Clinton issued a statement calling on Beijing to "examine openly the darkest events of its past". However, in February, when she visited China and urged the United States' largest foreign creditor to keep buying its bonds, Clinton insisted that human rights issues should not "interfere" with plans to deal with the financial crisis.

In another revealing response, Taiwan's ruling Kuomintang (KMT) blocked a motion by the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to condemn the Tiananmen massacre. The corrupt capitalist-landlord regime of the KMT was overthrown on the Chinese mainland by the Maoists and fled to Taiwan in 1949. With US backing, the dictatorial KMT claimed to be the legitimate government of China until 1972. Now the KMT is seeking to reunify with Mao's heirs, in order to benefit from China's emergence as the world's largest cheap labour platform since the Tiananmen bloodbath.

President Ma Ying-jeou had previously called on Beijing to reassess its verdict of the Tiananmen protests. But with Taiwanese corporations having invested up to \$300 billion in China or over 70 percent of Taiwan's total foreign investment, Ma has dropped this demand in favour of pursuing full economic integration with Beijing. Ma issued a statement describing the Tiananmen massacre only as a "painful chapter in history that must be faced".

The contrast between the attitudes of the various ruling elites and the sentiment of ordinary Chinese people over the Tiananmen anniversary reveals the irreconcilably opposed class interests at stake in the explosive struggles building up in China.



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