

# Origins and consequences of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre

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Two decades ago, on June 4 1989, Beijing resembled a war zone, with trucks ablaze, rapid and continuous gunfire and tanks rolling through streets strewn with dead bodies. During the previous weeks, around 200,000 troops from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had been brought into the capital following the imposition of martial law. On the orders of China's paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, the army crushed the two month-long protests by workers and students against the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime.

Although the events of June 3-4 are generally referred to as the Tiananmen Square massacre, most of the killings occurred when 40,000 heavily-armed troops forced their way through densely-populated working class districts to reach Tiananmen Square on the evening of June 3 and the following morning. Roadblocks were set up in the surrounding suburbs and pitched street battles took place between workers and the mechanised PLA.

Students began their protests in Beijing in April 1989, demanding democratic reforms. These opened the floodgates for a nationwide upheaval of the urban working class, which began to advance far more radical social demands. About 100 million people, encompassing virtually every higher-learning institution, half the country's technical schools and countless factories, mines and offices in some 400 cities participated in one form or another. By strangling the movement in Beijing, then unleashing a countrywide crackdown, including the arrest of tens of thousands of activists, the regime survived the revolutionary crisis.

Confronted by the mass protests, the regime was deeply divided. CCP general secretary Zhao Ziyang, who supported the students and liberal intelligentsia in order to accelerate his market reform agenda, was purged and placed under house arrest. A section of PLA soldiers expressed sympathy for the protestors, raising the spectre of civil war. Fearing the eruption of new oppositional movements, Beijing ended any talk of democratic reform after 1989.

The regime's official death toll of just 241, including soldiers, is disputed by almost every independent study of the massacre. Estimates range from 2,000 to 7,000 dead. The repression was aimed not only at intimidating the Chinese masses, but at sending an unambiguous message to global investors that China's police-state apparatus could be relied upon to regiment and contain the working class.

On June 2, 1989, the CCP Politburo Standing Committee met with the party's "Elders" headed by Deng and decided to clear Tiananmen Square by force.

At the meeting, Wang Zhen, one of Mao's peasant generals, expressed the sentiments of those present: "Those goddamn bastards! Who do they think they are, trampling on sacred ground like Tiananmen so long?! They're really asking for it! We should send the troops right now to grab those counter-revolutionaries, Comrade Xiaoping! What's the People's Liberation Army for, anyway? What are the martial law troops for? They're not supposed to just sit around and eat! ... We've got to do it or the common people will rebel! Anybody who tries to overthrow the

Communist Party deserves death and no burial!" [1]

Wang's comments demonstrated the open class hostility of the CCP towards the urban working class. The regime, which came to power in 1949 on the basis of Mao's peasant armies, was never socialist or communist. By 1989, forty years later, it functioned as a police-state instrument against the Chinese proletariat on behalf of world imperialism.

## The evolution of Maoism

The Tiananmen Square massacre confirmed the Trotskyist critique of Stalinism as an agent of world imperialism. Maoism was a variant of Stalinism that emerged following the crushing defeat of the working class during the 1925-27 Chinese revolution—the direct product of Stalin's class-collaborationist policy of subordinating the CCP to the bourgeois Kuomintang (KMT). In the aftermath, a section of the CCP leadership turned to Trotskyism and maintained its orientation to the urban proletariat. Mao Zedong, however, was deeply pessimistic about the revolutionary capacity of the working class, insisting on turning to the peasantry, with a perspective of a rural guerrilla war waged by a "Red Army".

The evolution of Maoism into a murderous, anti-working class regime had its origins in the rejection of international socialism in favour of the Stalinist perspective of the national road to socialism. According to Stalin's "two-stage" theory, backward countries like China had to first pass through a prolonged period of capitalist development, to allow the consolidation of large-scale industry and the working class, thus relegating the socialist revolution to the distant future. It was precisely this theory that strangled the Chinese revolution in 1927.

In the course of the twentieth century, the "two-stage" theory has produced only disaster for the working class. Throughout Asia, every Stalinist party has supported, in one way or another, the interests of their own national bourgeoisie. In 1965, the mass Indonesian Communist Party subordinated the working class to the bourgeois nationalist Sukarno, even as the military under General Suharto carried out its US-backed coup and slaughtered half a million workers and peasants. Just as the Vietnamese Communist Party's "victory" over US imperialism in 1975 paved the way for the country's transformation into today's cheap labour platform, so the coming to power of the Maoists in 1949 prepared for China's eventual emergence in the 1990s as the sweatshop of the world.

In the early 1930s, Leon Trotsky had warned that the CCP under Mao was a movement of "revolutionary petty proprietors", whose program represented the interests not of the working class but of the bourgeoisie, and whose peasant army would be deeply hostile to the working class if it succeeded in capturing the cities. The CCP's overthrow of the KMT regime in 1949 vindicated Trotsky's analysis. To sustain the CCP's "Bloc

of four classes”—the bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, peasantry and proletariat—Mao’s armies suppressed any independent activity by urban workers and physically destroyed the Chinese Trotskyist movement. The commanding stratum of the PLA provided a ready-made bureaucracy for the new state to suppress any initiative of the masses.

Mao embraced the Stalinist dogma of “building socialism in one country”. His turn towards nationalising industry and bureaucratically planned production was not a socialist policy involving democratic workers’ control, but a response to the economic crisis provoked by the Korean War in 1950-53 and the integration of China into the Soviet bloc. Deeply fearful of the impact of the uprisings of Hungarian and Polish workers in 1956, Mao supported Moscow’s military crackdown in Eastern Europe and sought to pre-empt a similar upheaval in China through the persecution of half a million workers and intellectuals in 1957.

Mao was always fearful of the fact that the development of large-scale industry would serve to strengthen the urban working class at the expense of the peasantry. In the late 1950s, he rejected a new five-year plan, implementing instead a series of utopian experiments in building “socialist” rural communes on the basis of “backyard technology”. The result was an economic disaster that allowed more openly pro-capitalist elements, led by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, to promote a pro-market agenda of decollectivising farms, allowing autonomy to state enterprise and encouraging trade. To hold onto his position, Mao launched the “Cultural Revolution” in 1966, mobilising millions of student youth in a campaign against the “capitalist roaders”. Its reactionary character was underscored by its attack on everything associated with urban culture as “bourgeois”.

The Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 was not the first time that the PLA was unleashed against the working class. In 1967, when millions of workers began to raise their own demands for the smashing of the hated state bureaucracy and formed mass industrial revolt committees, Mao did not hesitate to use the army to crush them, killing thousands. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, “Red China” was a society dominated by repressive military rule, the grotesque personality cult of Mao and economic stagnation. In 1971, to head off further political turmoil, Mao was driven to reach a rapprochement with US imperialism, making a mockery of his anti-imperialist demagoguery.

The economic and political crisis, however, was not unique to China. In the same year, the collapse of the Bretton Woods monetary system marked the end of the post-war boom, amid a wave of revolutionary struggles by the working class across the globe between 1968 and 1975. The autarkic Stalinist regimes were becoming increasingly vulnerable under conditions of the emergence of globalised production. Just as Mao’s policies created economic havoc in China, the Soviet Union was mired in economic stagnation. The two supposedly comradely regimes came to military blows—a product of their nationalism and chauvinism—allowing Washington to woo Beijing to its side.

Washington turned to China, not just to gain its political support against the Soviet Union. With international capital desperately searching for new sources of cheap labour to boost falling rates of profit and to attack the social position of workers in the advanced capitalist countries, the opening up of China offered new economic opportunities.

Even before Mao’s death in 1976, Western corporations began to return to China. From 1971-74, China’s trade with the non-Soviet bloc more than trebled. As early as 1975, Zhao Ziyang, then CCP secretary of Sichuan province, decollectivised farms, helping to propel him to political prominence. Mao’s immediate successor, Hua Guofeng, unveiled a “five-year plan” involving the massive importation of foreign capital and technology. When Deng Xiaoping pushed Hua aside and unleashed a fully-fledged market agenda in 1978, this was no radical break, but the logical evolution of Maoism.

## The crisis of market reform

China’s turn from autarky to the capitalist market was not done in isolation. In his memoirs published in May, the late Zhao Ziyang recalled that Beijing was initially inspired by the experiments in “market socialism” in Hungary and Yugoslavia. China, however, went much further. It copied the “Asian tigers” model, implemented in South Korea and Taiwan, which had become cheap labour platforms under military dictatorships. Zhao recalled that the plan he drafted was to create export zones involving 100-200 million people. His scheme was only realised after the resistance of the working class had been crushed in 1989.

In his book, Zhao admitted that by 1987, when he became CCP general secretary, he invented terms like “socialist market economy” to disguise the real implications of his policies and to thwart criticism that he was taking the “capitalist road”. “It was only because of ideological barriers that the term ‘free market’ wasn’t being used,” he wrote. [2]

Despite an initial increase in living standards for workers and farmers due to the higher productivities achieved through China’s access to foreign technologies and the international division of labour, market forces rapidly created enormous social divisions and tensions. A new capitalist class began to emerge and consolidate its position at the expense of the masses.

As one historian wrote: “It is one of the curiosities of the development of Chinese capitalism under the Deng regime that a significant portion of these initial capital accumulations were the fruits of official corruption. Prominent among the members of China’s new post-revolutionary ‘bourgeoisie’, for example, were local officials (and their friends and relatives) who were able to buy goods and materials at low state prices and sell them at higher market prices. Equally prominent, especially in the popular political consciousness, were the children of high Communist Party leaders who, in the early 1980s, were politically positioned to play a lucrative compradore role in establishing ties between foreign capitalists and state enterprises. While some of these fruits of bureaucratic corruption no doubt found their way into secret Swiss bank accounts, as rumour had it, most was invested in a vast variety of highly profitable domestic financial, industrial and commercial enterprises in what became an extraordinarily rapid process of capital accumulation and economic growth.” [3]

By 1987-88, the market reform agenda was running out of control due to price deregulation, the oversupply of credit and real estate speculation, leading to 30 percent inflation in the autumn of 1988. Zhao recalled: “The bank runs and hoarding of commodities led to an overall panic, which arrived with the force of a tidal wave. Every major city was in a tense situation.” [4]

Aggravating the social crisis, Zhao was forced to tighten credit, resulting in widespread factory closures. His previous ending of state-guaranteed employment had already dramatically increased the insecurity of factory workers, while millions of rural workers in collective firms were also being laid off. Incomes were being eroded by inflation. Farming output had declined for the third year in a row in 1988, due to the low state-controlled price of grain and the high market price of fertiliser. Tens of millions of migrant workers started to appear in urban areas looking for jobs, producing a steady rise in the crime rate. With rising numbers of protests and strikes, including riots in Tibet in March 1989, a political storm was looming.

## The emergence of the student movement

The roots of the political crisis that erupted in April-May 1989 lay in the regime's waning social support base among the peasantry and its failure to secure a new social buffer against the working class.

To legitimise market reform, Deng sought to cultivate support in intellectual and academic circles, and chose Hu Yaobang as CCP general secretary for that purpose. Western bourgeois social and philosophical thought was encouraged on Chinese campuses, including currents that openly blamed classical Marxism for the crimes of Mao and the CCP's dictatorial rule. Many students, hostile to the decades-long bureaucratic controls over youth activities, were attracted by the anti-establishment flavour of these newly available works.

A wave of protests by university students in 1986-87 frightened Deng, who removed Hu Yaobang from his post, in the name of opposing "bourgeois liberalisation", but preserved his membership in the Politburo. Deng was already concerned that student unrest had the potential to ignite a far bigger social movement.

The anti-Stalinist "Solidarity" movement of Polish workers in 1980-81 had already had a major impact on the thinking of the Chinese regime. In 1982, the CCP removed the right to strike from the Chinese constitution. The following year, as market reform was extended to urban industry, Beijing created the People's Armed Police—a 400,000-strong paramilitary force specialising in domestic repression.

Zhao Ziyang replaced Hu as CCP general secretary, but rapidly adopted the same approach—to use intellectuals to create a base of support for the increasingly unpopular market reform agenda. Similar moves were taking place in the former USSR and Eastern Europe, where the social and economic crisis was about to explode. Zhao's counterpart in the former Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, initiated the policy of "glasnost" (openness), which was similar to Zhao's conception of "transparency". Both called for "political reform", as a means of exploiting widespread public anger over the dictatorial character of Stalinist rule to advance their reactionary perspective of reintroducing the unfettered operation of the capitalist market.

The liberal intelligentsia represented a layer of the middle classes who felt they had not benefitted sufficiently from market reform. They demanded freedom of the press and curbs on the corruption associated with the well-connected children of CCP leaders, in order that they could gain a larger share of the wealth being created by the working class. Zhao recalled that after he became CCP general secretary in 1987: "I developed a strong belief that tensions in the relationship between the Party and the intelligentsia needed to be resolved. Yet, without political participation by intellectuals, it was impossible to improve the relationship in a fundamental way". [5]

Deng's suppression of "bourgeois liberalisation" only heightened frustrations within the intelligentsia. Then, on April 15, 1989, Hu Yaobang suddenly died of a heart attack during a Politburo meeting. University students in Beijing paid tribute to Hu as a means of expressing their support for his policies. However, the memorial meetings extolling his virtues soon gave way to more radical demands for democratic rights. The rallies swelled to thousands.

On April 17, the student gatherings to mourn Hu spread from the campuses into Tiananmen Square in the centre of Beijing, which had historically been the site for protests and demonstrations, including the anti-imperialist May Fourth Movement in 1919. The next day, hundreds of students from Peking University and the People's University staged a sit-in protest in front of the Great Hall of the People, demanding the National People's Congress rehabilitate Hu Yaobang's views on democracy and freedom, release the income details of top leaders, grant freedom of the press, increase education funding, end restrictions on

demonstrations, and hold democratic elections to replace "bad" government officials.

On April 19, when government officials failed to grant these demands, students laid siege to the Xinhua Gate of the Chinese leadership's office compound, raising the spectre of political unrest directed against the CCP leadership itself. On April 23, students from 21 universities formed the Autonomous Federation of Beijing University Students, to coordinate student strikes and to call on ordinary people to join their protests.

Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Deng Xiaoping, was not initially hostile to the student protests that erupted in mid-April. Zhao Ziyang, the CCP secretary, went so far as to endorse the demonstrations as "patriotic", which encouraged workers to begin to agitate for their own demands.

In Shaanxi, for instance, 10,000 people, including many workers, gathered daily in front of the provincial Communist Party office to discuss not only the death of Hu Yaobang, but social issues such as inflation, wages and housing. Such was the impact of the protests that by April 25, the State Security Ministry had issued a warning that students from all over China were sending delegates to Beijing to form a national organisation and commemorate the May Fourth Movement. New slogans of "No victory can be achieved without the support of the working class" from among the more radical students saw a shift of the movement to the left.

On April 20, the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation (WAF) was established by a small group of workers, and it emerged as the organising centre of the workers' movement by mid-May. Two days later, 100,000 people assembled in Tiananmen Square and one million took to the streets for Hu's funeral—most of them workers. On that day, the federation distributed leaflets, condemning the wealth of Deng Xiaoping's family, the privileges of the bureaucracy and the "shortcomings" of market reform. The WAF also demanded the stabilisation of prices and to make public the wealth of the top Chinese leaders.

The CCP leadership was divided—and the major cause was the intervention of the working class. Zhao was reluctant to use force to suppress the students and called for dialogue, while Premier Li Peng, who headed the hard-line wing, rejected any compromise or peaceful solution. Taking advantage of Zhao's visit to North Korea on April 23, Li took the initiative, reporting to Deng that nationwide unrest was being organised. The paramount leader gave his support for a tough response.

The result was a *People's Daily* editorial on April 26 denouncing the protests as "anti-Party, anti-socialist turmoil" and a "planned conspiracy" to overthrow the CCP. Outraged by the labelling of demands for social equality and democratic rights as "anti-socialist", more students and workers joined the protests. Right across China, huge demonstrations erupted, reflecting long pent-up anger over the CCP's betrayal of its promise that the 1949 revolution would bring about an equal and democratic society.

On April 30, Zhao returned to China and attempted to calm the students by trying to tone down the April 26 editorial. However, it was already widely known that Deng was behind the editorial and Zhao had little room to move. In order to reach an agreement with the students, Zhao promised to fight corruption and make token democratic reforms. He viewed the student movement as a vehicle for advancing his economic and political agenda, against that section of the CCP bureaucracy that opposed the market from the standpoint of preserving its privileged positions in the old state apparatus and industries.

Zhao also saw the students as a buffer against the working class. He recalled: "During the demonstrations, students raised many slogans and demands, but the problem of inflation was conspicuously missing, though inflation was a hot topic that could easily have resonated with and ignited all of society... In hindsight, it's obvious that the reason the students did not raise the issue of inflation was that they knew that this issue was

related to the reform program, and if pointedly raised to mobilise the masses, it could have turned out to obstruct the reform process.” [6]

Zhao’s support for the student protests, however, only emboldened the working class. While sections of elite Beijing university students withdrew from the demonstrations, students from other cities, as well as high school students and teachers, began to play a more prominent role in the protests. On the anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, a quarter of a million Beijing workers joined the 60,000 students who marched in Tiananmen Square. Similar protests occurred in 51 Chinese cities.

On May 13, a more radical current emerged among the students, calling for a hunger strike to pressure the regime to make concessions, especially to recognise the Students Autonomous Federation as a legal organisation. The regime could not comply, because to do so would have quickly led to demands by workers for recognition of the Workers Autonomous Federation.

The hunger strike, which drew in thousands of students, was planned just before the visit of President Gorbachev to Beijing, drawing world attention to the protests and dramatically increasing the political crisis of the CCP. The hunger strike and occupation of Tiananmen Square quickly became the focus of mass protests by workers, providing an arena for the WAF to publicly declare its existence, conduct agitation, coordinate visits to factories and recruit new members. Both Li Peng and Zhao Ziyang rushed to “dialogue” with workers’ representatives, particularly of the 200,000 workers at Capital Iron and Steel, but were unable to curb the radicalisation taking place within the working class.

On May 15, half a million workers and students rallied in Tiananmen Square, despite Zhao’s public pleas not to obstruct the historic Sino-Soviet summit. On May 17, two million people marched in Beijing, many under the banners of their workplace. Thousands of workers joined the WAF, not only in Beijing but in other Chinese cities. Eighteen provinces reported large-scale protests. On May 18, in the provincial capital of Hebei, 150,000 people took to the streets. In Shanghai, 100,000 workers, teachers, government officials, students and scientists turned out.

Unlike the liberal intelligentsia, the workers expressed hostility to the regime as whole. “The tyranny of the corrupt officials is nothing short of extreme... The people will no longer believe the lies of the authorities for on our banners appear the words: science, democracy, freedom, human rights and rule by law... We have conscientiously documented the exploitation of the workers. The method of understanding exploitation is based on the methods of analysis given in Marx’s *Das Capital*... We were astonished to find that the ‘peoples public servants’ have devoured all surplus value created by the people’s blood and sweat”, declared one of the WAF’s leaflets. [7]

The document called for an investigation into the corruption of the entire CCP leadership, including Zhao Ziyang, and the freezing of their personal assets under a national peoples’ committee.

## **Martial law**

On May 17, the threat of a working class rebellion saw a decisive shift within the CCP leadership away from Zhao’s policy of compromise with the students to military repression. In a report to Deng Xiaoping, Zhao advised: “If we take a confrontational stance with the masses, a dangerous situation could ensue in which we lose complete control.” [8] However, Deng backed the hard-line majority, blaming Zhao for supporting the “political turmoil”.

“We’ve all seen how the situation in Beijing and across the country has become most grave... We first have to settle the instability in Beijing, because if we don’t we’ll never be able to settle it in other provinces,

regions, and cities... If things continued like this, we could even end up under house arrest. After thinking long and hard about this, I’ve concluded that we should bring in the People’s Liberation Army and declare martial law in Beijing—more precisely, in Beijing’s urban district. The aim of martial law will be to suppress turmoil once and for all and to return things quickly to normal,” Deng declared. [9]

Zhao refused to order the army against the students and decided to resign as party general secretary. He was barred from doing so, however, to avoid compounding the political crisis, but was effectively pushed aside. Knowing that his political career was finished, Zhao visited the students in Tiananmen Square, urging them to leave before the military arrived. He was placed under house arrest, where he remained until his death in 2005. Zhao’s successor was the Shanghai CCP party secretary, Jiang Zemin, who had firmly backed a crackdown against the protestors from the outset.

On May 20, Premier Li Peng declared martial law in Beijing, provoking a protest by one million people the following day. To counter the troops, workers and youth set up street barricades, while motorcyclists formed early warning teams. When the army arrived on May 23, thousands of workers and students tried to persuade the soldiers not to turn their weapons against the people. Many of the troops were moved to tears and even drove their trucks away. The next day, the army divisions from the Beijing region were ordered to pull out, to prevent the soldiers from joining the workers. Deng decided to transport troops from the remote provinces to implement martial law, allowing the protests to continue for two more weeks.

One study explained: “The declaration of martial law shortly after midnight on the evening of 19 May radically altered the pattern of political activity in the city. Beginning with the successful blockade of army units by unarmed citizens throughout the city in the early morning hours of 20 May and afterward, mass resistance to the government was suddenly a reality. By daylight on the 20th, *gongzilian* [WAF] reiterated its call for a general strike (excluding essential services, communications and transportation), to stay in force until the troops withdrew. The militant positions that the workers’ organisation had articulated, and the organisation it had developed on the square in the preceding week, thrust it into the middle of unfolding events on the streets. Meanwhile, popular outrage over martial law drove many new recruits into the freshly declared workers’ organisation, swelling its ranks.” [10]

From May 21-22, protests, many numbering in the hundreds of thousands, expanded to 131 cities across China, even involving layers of low-ranking CCP members, to support the actions of the Beijing workers. On the eve of June 3, WAF’s membership had swelled to 20,000. It had 150 full-time activists, had adopted a constitution, elected a leading committee and created a team of guards to protect the hunger strikers. It was operating a printing facility and a public broadcaster that drew massive crowds of workers to hear political speeches each evening.

With the authorities in Beijing paralysed, workers started to take matters into their own hands in simple matters such as directing traffic. Production ground to a halt as workers participated in the demonstrations. On May 25, one million people held another massive protest in Beijing. A WAF statement issued the next day declared: “We [the working class] are the rightful masters of this nation. We must be heard in national affairs. We absolutely must not allow this small band of degenerate scum of the nation and the working class [the Stalinist leadership] to usurp our name and suppress the students, murder democracy and trample human rights.” Another statement declared: “The final struggle has arrived... We have seen that the fascist governments and Stalinist dictatorships spurned by hundreds of millions of people have not, indeed will not, voluntarily withdraw from the historical stage... Storm this 20th century Bastille, this last stronghold of Stalinism!” [11]

## The crisis of revolutionary perspective

Although the crisis had posed the question of the working class taking power, the issue was how and on the basis of what program. For decades, the CCP had used its monopoly over the media and educational institutions to promote the lie that Stalinism equalled Marxism, socialism and communism. The only political movement that offered a scientific analysis of Stalinism and the political means for workers to fight it—the Fourth International—had been ruthlessly suppressed in the 1950s. The Chinese Trotskyists had been murdered, jailed or forced into exile.

Chinese workers had no access to the works of Trotsky, or indeed anything about the history and struggles of the international working class, other than the Chinese regime's own vulgar justifications for the crimes and betrayals of Stalinism. They knew nothing of the political struggles of the Left Opposition led by Trotsky from 1923 against the emerging Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and its betrayals of the international working class. Trotsky's penetrating analysis of Stalin's betrayal of the Chinese revolution in 1925-27 was, of course, banned, as were the far-reaching conclusions that he drew in 1933 following the Soviet bureaucracy's criminal role in enabling Hitler to come to power unopposed. His decision to found the Fourth International and his call for a political revolution by the Soviet working class against the Stalinist bureaucracy had a burning relevance to Chinese workers in 1989. Needless to say, the entire history of the international Trotskyist movement in the post-war period, and its struggles against petty bourgeois opportunism and nationalism, remained a closed book.

In May-June 1989, Chinese workers were driven by their own immediate experiences and their hatred for the Maoist regime. Their demands instinctively reflected their own independent class interests and went far further than those of the students. But, as the course of events was to tragically confirm, it was impossible for the working class to improvise a revolutionary leadership and program in the heat of the moment.

The protest movement was thus left in the hands of the student leaders, whose views were largely dominated by naïve illusions that a dialogue with the regime about the granting of reforms was possible. The inexperienced WAF leaders were guided by the syndicalist conception that independent unions should be formed to negotiate better wages and conditions with the bureaucracy and the emerging capitalists, not that the working class had to take power in China, as part of the struggles of the international working class for world socialism.

The WAF's key leader, Han Dongfang, was a 26-year-old railway worker, who became known as "China's Walesa", after the leader of the Polish Solidarity movement. He gathered his political ideas in the course of walking among the protestors in Tiananmen Square. After listening to speeches by the students on "freedom of association", he and other workers decided to formally establish the WAF as an independent union.

At a meeting with students on May 26, Han expressed a certain limited class critique of the student movement, but nevertheless accepted its continued political leadership. "You theoreticians can go on acting as the brains of the movement, and students can give it its emotional spark. But unless workers are the main force, the struggle for democracy will never succeed... I hear you talking about 'citizens', who are out on the streets, when what I think you mean is 'workers'. I don't know if there is a deliberate evasion on your part, but it's important to call these people by their true name". [12]

The WAF was unable to make an appeal to the PLA troops, which would have required linking the struggle of urban workers with the multi-millioned rural poor. The soldiers were certainly far from solidly behind the Maoist regime. Even those troops brought by Deng from outside Beijing had to be banned from reading the news for more than a week

before they were suddenly sent to suppress the protests. On June 3-4, many troops, especially those of the 28th Army, still disobeyed orders to shoot the protestors and threw away their guns. At a leadership meeting on June 2, Deng expressed the fear that the army could split and a civil war break out. The workers' movement, however, was politically unprepared to win the soldiers to its side.

During the June 4 crackdown, Han escaped with the aid of a dozen young men who risked their lives to save the man they viewed as the leader of China's workers. One of them said: "We don't know how many people will die tonight. Blood will flow like a river. But you cannot die—you will be China's Lech Walesa." But Han was not politically equipped to lead the working class against the regime. He told Reuters in 2004: "What that young man said to me is like a rock pressing against my heart. I can't even breathe whenever I think of it today. I was an electrician who got into a movement with a muddled head. Then there were the bullets and I heard those words. It was a very strange moment."

Revolutionary crises often push previously little known individuals to the forefront of the class struggle, placing before them decisions that will decide the course of history. The Russian working class, with the backing of the peasantry, was able to take power in the 1917 October Revolution because it had a long-established *professional* revolutionary party headed by Lenin, a party that had waged a determined struggle over decades against all forms of opportunism in the labour movement, not only in Russia but internationally. Indeed, the collapse of the WAF and the subsequent evolution of leaders like Han vindicated Lenin's conclusion that spontaneously the working class was unable to rise above trade union consciousness—i.e., the struggle for better wages and conditions within the existing social order.

Since 1994, Han has become a semi-official adviser on labour reform through his *China Labour Bulletin* and his radio talk shows based in Hong Kong. His activities are financed by the Western trade union bureaucracy, whose aim is to prevent workers from challenging the interests of foreign investors in China. In 2004, Han told the Hong Kong business newspaper, the *Standard*, that he never wanted to lead a workers' revolt in China. "I have been working hard to prevent it from happening... but I do despair at times."

Han's perspective is to pressure the CCP for social reforms through legal action by workers, rather than protests on the street. He advocates the establishment of state-controlled unions for workers to carry out "collective bargaining" with employers, in the hope that such mechanisms will reduce social unrest. Now opposed to the class struggle, Han has converted to Christianity. "All my life has been pre-arranged by God ... God has the plans" for Chinese workers, he told the *Standard*.

By June 3, 1989, the stage was set for a showdown between the Stalinist regime and the working class. The CCP ordered the PLA troops, who had been brought from the provinces and primed for action, to clear Tiananmen Square of protestors using whatever means necessary. A series of bloody clashes ensued, as unarmed workers and their supporters tried to defend barricades erected on the major roads into the city centre against soldiers armed with automatic rifles and backed by tanks.

The PLA's offensive was officially documented. A briefing by the Martial Law Command recorded one of the bloodiest scenes in the Muxidi district of Beijing during the evening of June 3, 1989.

"At 9:30 p.m. these troops began advancing eastward toward the Square and encountered their first obstacle at Gongzhufen, where students and citizens had set up a blockade. An anti-riot squad fired tear gas canisters and rubber bullets into the crowd. At first the people retreated, but then they stopped. The anti-riot squad pressed forward, firing more tear gas and more rubber bullets. Again the crowd retreated but soon stopped. The troops kept firing warning shots into the air, but the people displayed no signs of fear. The stretch from Gongzhufen to the Military Museum, Beifengwo Street, and Muxidi is less than two kilometers, but the troops'

advance was slow because of the citizens' interference...

"Believing the troops would not use live ammunition, the citizens grew increasingly bold. At 10:10 p.m. tens of thousands formed a human wall at Beifengwo Street to block the troops; the two sides faced each other over a distance of twenty to thirty meters. Some of the citizens continued throwing rocks and other objects. Using an electric bullhorn, the commanding officer exhorted the citizens and students to disperse and let the troops pass. Then when the measure failed, he decided to use force to assure his soldiers could reach their position on time. Infantrymen led the way, firing into the air. Then the soldiers—with the first two rows in a kneeling position and those in the back standing—pointed their weapons at the crowd. At approximately 10:30 p.m., under a barrage of rocks, the troops opened fire." When the protestors realised that live ammunition was being used, they rapidly retreated to the Muxidi Bridge for another round of the battle. [13]

Another report by the State Security Ministry continued: "At Muxidi Bridge the troops were stopped once again as citizens and students threw the broken bricks they prepared in advance. A few dozen baton-wielding members of the troops' anti-riot brigade stormed onto the bridge, where they were met with a barrage of broken bricks as thick as rain. The brigade was driven back. Then regular troops, row by row, came rushing to the bridge... and turning their weapons on the crowd. The soldiers then alternated between shooting into the air and firing onto the crowd. People began crumpling to the ground. Each time shots rang out, the citizens hunkered down; but with each lull in the fire they stood up again. Slowly driven back by the troops, they stood their ground, from time to time shouting 'Fascists!' 'Hooligan government!' and 'Murderers!'" [14]

After crossing the bridge, the troops continued to encounter resistance. "The soldiers pushed the electric buses and other roadblocks out of the way, then turned their weapons on the protestors again. Some soldiers who were hit by rocks lost their self-control and began firing wildly at anyone who shouted 'Fascists' or threw rocks or bricks. At least a hundred citizens and students fell to the ground in pools of blood; most were rushed to nearby Fuxing Hospital by other students and citizens.

"The sound of helicopters overhead and gunfire in the streets brought citizens who lived on Fuxingmenwei Boulevard to their windows, where they cursed and threw objects at the soldiers, who therefore shot back. Bullets ricocheted off buildings up and down the five hundred meters between Muxidi and the headquarters of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions." [15]

After the infantry cleared away the road blocks, army trucks and armoured personnel carriers carrying more soldiers moved toward Tiananmen Square. Troops continued to fire at protestors, who were attempting to set up new road barriers. "To the end of the bridge, near the subway station, lay twelve lumps of flesh, blood, and debris. The bodies of dead and wounded were being delivered continually to the door of Fuxing Hospital... Virtually everyone at Fuxing Hospital was cursing 'Fascists!' 'Animals!' and 'Bloody massacre!'" [16]

The army had finally cleared Tiananmen Square by 5:40 a.m. on June 4, forcing out thousands of resisting protestors. A special force unit targeted the headquarters of the Workers Autonomous Federation, killing 20-30 people there. Then tanks ran over protestors who were not fast enough to escape, crushing them to death.

Outraged by the bloody repression, workers and students in 63 cities immediately responded with spontaneous protests. In the following five days, the demonstrations expanded to 181 cities, with workers setting up roadblocks to counter an expected military crackdown. On June 5, Shanghai's traffic was brought to a standstill as 1,200 buses and vehicles blocked 122 major intersections. "In the suburbs fewer than a third of workers showed up at factories. Railroad operations were interrupted at five blocked crossings," a fax from the Shanghai government to Beijing noted. Shanghai authorities had to publicly pacify workers by promising

that the military would not be allowed into the city. [17]

## The aftermath

So tense was the situation that the regime initially denied that any civilians had been killed. The official toll still stands at just 241 deaths, including soldiers, but the figure is not credible. Independent analysts estimate that up to 7,000 people died, although the actual toll may never be known. The massacre was followed by a nationwide crackdown, directed especially against workers and their leaders. An estimated 40,000 activists were rounded up in June and July alone. Dozens were executed. Some are still imprisoned to this day. Moreover, all citizens of Beijing were required to participate a campaign of "self-criticism", forcing them to reflect their "mistakes" of supporting the political unrest.

The defeat had far-reaching consequences for the working class in China and around the world. China was transformed into the world's premier cheap labour platform, and the remaining social gains of the 1949 revolution were liquidated. Most state enterprises were sold off or shut down and access to public housing, medical care and education was replaced by the principle of the market—"user pays". Today China is one of the world's most unequal societies.

The impact went far beyond the borders of China. Working class resistance to the pro-market agenda of the Stalinist leaderships in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was already developing at the time of the massacre. In July 1989, a wave of strikes by Soviet miners erupted over falling living standards produced by the policies of perestroika. Gorbachev concluded from the events in China that capitalist restoration had to be dramatically accelerated before the Soviet bureaucracy faced its own working class rebellion. Later in 1989, the Berlin Wall collapsed, initiating a process that led to the fall of the Stalinist regimes throughout Eastern Europe, the break-up of the Soviet Union itself in 1991 and the restoration of capitalism.

Throughout the advanced capitalist countries, the free-market agenda championed by Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the US in the early 1980s was provoking working class opposition. The open embrace of the "free market" by the Stalinist leaderships was a political shot in the arm for Western governments facing a growing wave of strikes and protests. Bourgeois commentators across the political spectrum triumphantly proclaimed the end of socialism and of any alternative to the capitalist market.

The International Committee of the Fourth International was alone in explaining that the processes of globalised production that had undermined the shut-in, autarkic economies of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China, spelled the end of all nationally-based reformist programs and foreshadowed a profound crisis of the entire nation-state system in which capitalism was rooted.

After the Tiananmen Square massacre, Western political leaders and the media shed a few crocodile tears for the protestors and endlessly repeated the line that the Chinese "communists" has suppressed the "democracy" movement. The false identification of the Stalinist regime in Beijing with socialism and communism became increasingly ludicrous as global capitalism embraced "communist" China as a vital source of cheap labour and profits.

In fact, the huge US and other transnational corporations could barely conceal their delight at the bloodbath in Tiananmen Square, recognising it as a guarantee that the same ruthless police-state measures would be used to protect their investments. Foreign capital flooded into China during the 1990s to the tune of tens of billions of dollars annually, transforming the country into the world's main cheap labour production centre. The

opening up of China, as well as India, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, doubled the size of the available global workforce to four billion, and provided vast new sources of surplus value to world imperialism. At the same time, these abundant sources of cheap, disciplined labour enabled corporations to batter down the conditions of workers in the West.

For a short time China's market reforms stagnated after 1989, but only due to an initial period of political instability. Deng intervened decisively in 1992—following the collapse of the Soviet Union—and toured the booming Special Economic Zones in the south, indicating the regime's full commitment to capitalism. The economic figures speak for themselves. In 1992, China's GDP skyrocketed by 12 percent, followed by 14 percent in 1993, and 12 percent in 1994. In 1994, China received \$US34 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI)—more than for the entire first decade after market reform began in 1978. Since 1996, China has received more FDI than any developing country in the world.

In 2002, China became the world's largest recipient of FDI, and only slipped to second place behind the US as Wall Street became a magnet for huge inflows of finance capital. By 1997, China was the world's seventh largest economy. A decade later, it had overtaken Germany to become the third largest, fuelled mainly by the debt-driven demand in the US for Chinese exports. The price paid by the Chinese working class for this staggering expansion was underscored by a 13.7 percent decline in the share of GDP going to wages between 1997 and 2007. Over the same period, the share going to corporate profits rose by 10.1 percent.

Commenting on the Tiananmen Square massacre, the *Wall Street Journal* noted on May 29, 2009: "In fact, 1989 marked the beginning of China's supercharged path to economic reform. The results have been tremendous: China is now the second pillar of the global economy and is increasingly vital given the vulnerability of the United States." The newspaper explained that the American and Chinese economies were now intimately intertwined, demonstrated by China's emergence as America's largest creditor and China's dependence on manufacturing exports to the vast American market.

Cheap exports from China helped to suppress global inflation and allowed the US Federal Reserve to continue its low-interest rate policy. At the same time, China's massive trade surpluses were recycled back into the US financial markets as a means of maintaining the existing dollar-yuan exchange rate. China now holds \$1.5 trillion worth of US assets, including about \$760 billion in US treasury bonds and \$490 billion in the bonds of government-backed mortgage lenders. These processes combined to help fuel an unprecedented expansion of financial speculation on Wall Street, which imploded in 2008, creating the worst global economic crisis since the 1930s.

Far from being immune, China is being engulfed by this economic tidal wave as markets for its exports dry up. All the "advantages" of China's vast supply of cheap labour have suddenly become a nightmare for the regime. More than 20 million migrant workers, mainly in the export industries, have already lost their jobs. Some academics have warned that job losses among migrant workers could hit 50 million by the end of 2009. One million college graduates from last year are yet to find a job, even as 6 million more graduates will soon join the labour market and demand for skilled labour is disappearing.

Western corporations exploited Chinese workers not only to suppress wages at home, but to break-up the large concentrations of workers in factories and other workplaces, who had been able to use their industrial muscle to challenge both management and government. Their agenda, however, has created a massive working class in China, assembled in countless plants employing thousands of employees and, in some cases, hundreds of thousands. The CCP now confronts the world's largest and most concentrated working class, whose objective social strength is far greater than the regime's police-state apparatus.

All the social contradictions that led to the 1989 explosion have been reproduced today on a far higher level. At one end of the social scale, 400 million workers labour in oppressive conditions on poverty-level wages, facing constant financial insecurity, compounded by the rising cost of privatised health care, education and housing. In the countryside, market relations have created a vast pool of hundreds of millions of rural poor, many of whom depend on income from family members working in the cities. At the other end of the scale, unparalleled wealth has been accumulated in the hands of a tiny elite that is closely connected with the CCP bureaucracy. Apart from the US, China has the largest number of dollar billionaires in the world, many of whom are either CCP members or related to them.

A new explosion of the working class in China and internationally is inevitable, as world capitalism plunges into a historic breakdown. The global processes of production have integrated Chinese workers with their counterparts around the world as never before. Very often they are exploited by the same American, Japanese and European transnational corporations. At the same time, Chinese workers have at their disposal the powerful and revolutionary tools of the Internet and electronic communications, directly cutting across the decades-long efforts of the Stalinist regime to isolate them from their international class brothers and sisters.

These objective processes, however, will not automatically resolve the critical political issues confronting the Chinese working class. That can only be done through an assimilation of the lessons of all the strategic experiences of the international working class throughout the twentieth century, including the terrible defeat of 1989. To do that, workers, youth and intellectuals must turn to the international socialist perspective and program of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and participate in the fight to build a section of the ICFI within the Chinese working class.

#### Notes:

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4. *Prisoner of the State*, p.223
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