

The Chinese working class emerges

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The emergence of struggles by workers in China over the past few weeks is of enormous significance for the working class internationally. Against those who wrote off the proletariat as a revolutionary social force and declared the class struggle to be old hat, the first outbursts of the working class in China, following on from the strikes in Greece, are sending tremors through global ruling elites.

The international financial press has followed with considerable concern the strike by workers in Honda's transmission plant in South China, which paralysed the corporation's production for almost two weeks. The mainly young workers defied government intimidation, the state-run trade unions and management, and only returned to work this week after being granted a significant wage rise.

Major corporations such as Honda now depend heavily on the super-profits extracted from cheap, regimented labour in China. The reliance of international capital on China has been magnified by the global financial crisis that erupted in 2007-08. Any upsurge of the multi-millioned working class in China not only directly threatens corporate profits, but would inevitably reverberate throughout the world economy and financial system.

The vast scale of production in China was underscored by the media spotlight on the wave of suicides at the Foxconn plant, which manufactures electronic goods for major global corporations such as Dell and Apple. The plant, where 400,000 people work, constitutes a city in itself—huge, alienating and run like a military camp. One comment on a Chinese online forum declared: “When I look at Foxconn, I feel reminded of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. They show a world in which human beings are being

degraded to gearwheels in a huge machine.”

The Foxconn sweatshop has provided images and put faces to the explosive development of the Chinese working class, which has swelled from 120 million to more than 400 million over the past three decades. Shenzhen, where Foxconn is located, was a fishing village in the early 1980s and is now an industrial centre of 12 million people. While Foxconn is one of the country's largest plants, there are others of similar size and countless smaller ones. In eastern China, entire cities have been turned over to the manufacture of a single product, creating “sock” towns, “zipper” towns and “air conditioner” towns, involving millions of workers.

Instinctively, workers sense the necessity for international class unity. The youthful workforces at places like Honda have grown up with the Internet and mobile phones. They are well aware that their low wages are the source of immense profits for international corporations. When the strikers sang the *Internationale*, it was a recognition that they are in the same boat as workers around the world, facing similar problems and common corporate enemies.

There is no denying the determination and courage of young workers at Honda, but that will not spontaneously resolve the complex political issues they confront. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime might make a few temporary concessions, but it is organically hostile to the working class and rests on a police-state apparatus, which it has never hesitated to use. The CCP's first actions in seizing power in 1949, at the head of peasant armies, were to suppress workers in the major centres.

Yesterday marked the 21st anniversary of the 1989

Tiananmen Square massacre, when tanks and soldiers were sent to crush workers and students in Beijing and other cities demanding democratic rights and decent living standards. For all their crocodile tears, governments and corporations around the world understood that Beijing was willing to go to any lengths to prevent unrest by workers. Billions of dollars in foreign investment flooded into the country.

The CCP regime is acutely sensitive to the social time bomb on which it rests. Having all but abandoned its previous socialist phrase mongering, it has, like its counterparts in other countries, promoted crass nationalism in an effort to create a base among middle class layers and to divide workers. Harking back to China's past as an oppressed semi-colonial country, the CCP argues that China should now take its place among the world's great capitalist powers. It has deliberately fostered and encouraged anti-Japanese racism in particular.

The working class can only go forward by rejecting all forms of nationalism and racism and consciously unifying its struggles internationally. The Honda strikers in China face conditions no different from the millions of young "freeters" in Japan, who make up the bulk of that country's large casualised, temporary workforce. With the onset of the global financial crisis, they were laid off in their thousands from auto and electronics plants in Japan as exports slumped.

It is not just the CCP that Chinese workers confront. The greater political danger comes from those who claim to support workers and oppose the regime in Beijing, but seek to block any independent political movement of the working class. In this regard, the comments of Han Dongfang, the exiled leader of the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation, are significant and were highlighted in the *Financial Times*.

Han played a prominent role in the 1989 Tiananmen protests and was influential among layers of workers who joined the students to demand decent living standards as well as democratic rights. Han's perspective was never to overthrow capitalism and the Chinese regime but to reform them. In the wake of the

latest strike, he emphasised to the media that labour rights and political rights had to be separated. "I am doing my best to depoliticise the labour movement in China," he said.

To depoliticise the working class means to politically disarm it. In the American media in particular, comparisons have been made between the Honda strike in China and the sit-down strikes of US autoworkers in the 1930s. That movement of the American working class graphically illustrated the consequences of separating the defence of labour rights from a political struggle. The AFL-CIO union bureaucracy, which purged socialists in the 1950s and subordinated workers to the Democratic Party, functions today as the open agent of the corporations in imposing their dictates on workers.

The task facing workers in China, as in other countries, is to learn the essential political lessons of the key strategic experiences of the working class internationally over the past century. In particular, that means a careful study of protracted struggle of the international Trotskyist movement for genuine Marxism against its polar opposite—Stalinism and Maoism. That is the first step toward the building of a Chinese section of the International Committee of the Fourth International as the necessary revolutionary leadership for the emerging movement of the working class.

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