Chinese leadership meeting squashes talk of political reform

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26 October 2010

Despite signs of a debate in ruling circles in China, the central committee plenum of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Beijing from October 15 to 18 did not announce any significant steps toward "political reform". The final communiqué released on October 18 made only passing reference—without elaborating—to "active but steady" efforts to promote "political restructuring".

The meeting's most significant decision was to elect Vice President Xi Jinping as the vice chairman of the party's Central Military Commission (CMC), in preparation for taking over as China's president and CMC chairman from Hu Jintao, who is due to retire in 2012. The CCP regime continues to centrally rest on its vast military-police apparatus.

Calls for "political reform" have nothing to do with recognising the fundamental democratic rights of working people. What is being proposed are limited changes to allow for greater political involvement of the emerging middle classes, which sections of the CCP leadership want to consolidate as a base of support amid rising social tensions.

On the eve of the plenum, 23 party elders, including Li Rui, former secretary of late CCP chairman Mao Zedong, wrote an open letter to the central committee calling for "freedom of speech and press" and condemning China's censorship as "a scandalous mark on the history of world democracy".

Premier Wen Jiabao has made several calls for "political reform" this year. During his trip to attend the UN General Assembly in New York last month, he outlined his broad proposals. He said the CCP needed to "gradually improve the democratic election system", "improve the legal system" and "to accept oversight by the news media and other parties".

In the interview, Wen stressed that China was "not a superpower". He noted that hundreds of millions of people lived in poverty and that the economy was heavily dependent on external demand to keep unemployment under control. Pointing to the fears in Chinese ruling circles, he urged the US not to push for a rapid revaluation of the yuan, as this could trigger a social explosion.

Wen initiated the debate on political reform in April when he published an article praising the late CCP general secretary Hu Yaobang, with whom he worked in 1985-86. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Hu argued for ideological "liberalisation" to complement the pro-market reforms of paramount leader Deng Xiaoping and the dumping of Mao's socialistic rhetoric.

Deng dismissed Hu in 1987 after his policy encouraged unrest among university students demanding democratic rights. Hu's death in April 1989 triggered broader protests of students and liberal intellectuals in Beijing demanding "democratic reform", which was endorsed by the then CCP general secretary Zhao Ziyang. When urban workers throughout China joined the protests and began raising their own class demands, Deng purged Zhao and ordered the army to crush the protestors in Tiananmen Square on June 3-4, 1989.

For much of the past two decades, discussion of "democratic reform" has been a taboo for the CCP. The dominant CCP factions, especially those around former President Jiang Zemin who came to power in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, have argued that any democratic concessions would open the floodgates for widespread social unrest. Their stance is summed up in Jiang's slogan of "nip the unrest in the bud"—that is, with police-state measures.

The current president, Hu Jintao, who was appointed as Jiang's successor by Deng, demonstrated his support for repressive policies, when, as CCP secretary in Tibet, he

ordered a brutal crackdown on protests in March 1989. Before taking over as president in 2003, Hu hinted that he would encourage debate over "political reform". However, faced with rising social tensions, Hu has been just as ruthless as his predecessors in suppressing any opposition.

The CCP central committee's preoccupation with rising class tensions was evident in the plenum's discussion over the new five-year economic plan. The official Xinhua news agency reported: "The widening gap between rich and poor is the severe social reality faced by China's Communist Party and government. It hinders the harmonious development of the world's most populous country."

President Hu proposed a new slogan of "inclusive growth" to indicate that prosperity should be spread more broadly beyond the corporate elite and party bureaucrats. The call for "inclusive growth" is just as fanciful in China as in other capitalist economies. Over the past two decades, as China has become the world's premier cheap labour platform, the social chasm between rich and poor has only widened.

Wen's move to initiate debate over "political reform" reflects the regime's difficulty in finding a stable basis of support. As it has jettisoned its socialist phrasemongering, the CCP has increasingly whipped up reactionary nationalist sentiment directed against Japan in particular. But even this ideological tool threatens to backfire on the regime.

During the CCP plenum, anti-Japanese protests erupted in several cities among university students, calling on Beijing to take tougher measures against Japan following the recent conflict over the control of disputed islets in the East China Sea. The authorities deployed paramilitary police to suppress the demonstrators, not because of the demands raised, but out of fear that protests over any issue could widen to other issues and layers of the population.

Just after Wen's article on Hu Yaobang, a series of strikes erupted in auto and electronics factories, beginning with a stoppage at Honda's transmission plant in Foshan in May. At the same time, a spate of suicides among young employees at the giant Foxconn factory complex in Shenzhen caused a public uproar in China and internationally over the brutality of the country's labour regime.

The discontent among workers provoked fears in ruling circles in China and internationally over the prospect of a full-scale rebellion of China's multi-million working class. Limited political reform is viewed as a means of containing social tensions.

An editorial in the *Financial Times* on October 13 declared: "China's spectacular economic growth may not have required fundamental political reforms. But ultimately, political repression does not work. It treats the symptoms of social discontent while leaving the causes to fester." The newspaper called on the Chinese government to check the actions of "over-mighty corporations and officials" in order to take the steam out of widespread discontent.

During the strikes in May-June, the *Financial Times* promoted Han Dongfang, the former leader of the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation during the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square. Han advocated "de-politicising" the Chinese labour movement by granting limited union rights and "collective bargaining" within the framework of capitalism.

The strident official denunciations of the awarding of this year's Nobel Peace Prize to jailed Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo is a clear sign that Beijing has no intention of implementing any significant political reforms. As far as the dominant sections of the Chinese bureaucracy are concerned, the slightest loosening of police-state controls threatens to unleash a movement of the Chinese working class that now numbers 400 million.

The maintenance of authoritarian methods of rule simply means that when the class struggle erupts, as it inevitably will, it will take on particularly explosive forms.