

The siege of Wukan village in China

John Chan**24 December 2011**

The determined struggle by the villagers of Wukan in Guangdong province to oppose the corrupt sale of their collectively owned land to developers is a sign of what is to come, not only among China's rural masses, but also its urban working class.

The acute social tensions in China find their expression in numerous protests and strikes often involving many thousands of people. An estimated 180,000 "mass incidents" took place in 2010. But few have been as protracted as the standoff in Wukan, which has lasted for months despite heavy-handed police-state measures, including arrests and an armed siege of the small community of 20,000. Two weeks ago, one of the protest leaders, Xue Jinbo, died in police custody in suspicious circumstances.

In September, the villagers drove out the local Communist Party officials, who left behind an empty police station and government offices, and elected their own representative committee. Xue's son explained: "We found we were better at administration. The old officials turned out not to have had any accounts in their office, so they must have been swindling us."

The Wukan protest began to pose the issue of toppling the corrupt Stalinist bureaucracy and replacing it with democratic organs of working people. The stand by the villagers struck a sympathetic chord among wide layers of working people, in both rural areas and neighbouring manufacturing centres.

Inspired by the struggle in Wukan, some 50,000 people protested in Haimen in nearby Shantou city on Tuesday over pollution from a coal-fired power plant and its impact on local fishing grounds. Demonstrators occupied the township offices before being dispersed by riot police using tear gas. Despite the crackdown,

they returned the next day to block a main expressway.

In the provincial capital Guangzhou, small protests have taken place in solidarity with the Wukan villagers. Among those handing out leaflets calling for mass support for Wukan have been small layers of workers.

Export factories in Guangdong have been rocked in recent weeks by a series of strikes as owners respond to the deepening global economic crisis by cutting jobs, wages and conditions. Thousands of workers on December 10 clashed with riot police sent to break up an occupation of Shenzhen Hailiang Storage Products. Workers at Dongguan Essential Paper Products have staged a round-the-clock sit-in since December 17 after the management suddenly shut the factory and disappeared without paying wages.

Particularly troubling for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership was the call by Wukan villagers for elections throughout the country, including for the top leadership. It threatened to provide a political focal point for a wider mass movement of working people throughout the country against the regime.

After the Wukan villagers announced a march to the county government headquarters in Lufeng, the Guangdong provincial authorities backed down, temporarily at least. They agreed to release four detained village representatives, legalise the elected village committee and carry out an independent investigation into the death of their protest leader Xue in police custody.

However, the broader social tensions that gave rise to the Wukan protest are not easing. Beijing responded to the 2007-08 global financial crisis by ordering the state banks to unleash a flood of cheap credit, much of which

flowed into real estate speculation. Local governments colluded with developers to appropriate collectively owned land and forcibly evict farmers and residents to make way for lucrative property projects.

Now the Chinese economy, which is heavily dependent on exports to Europe, the US and Japan, is slowing down. Factory owners facing thin profit margins are squeezing workers, moving to regions with cheaper labour or shutting down altogether. The bubble in property prices is threatening to burst, creating financial havoc, particularly for local governments that are sitting on huge debts.

The working class and rural masses face a common enemy—a parasitic bureaucracy that represents the interests of the corporate elite created by the processes of capitalist restoration since 1978. While nearly half a billion Chinese are struggling on \$US2 or less a day, the investable capital of the country's 535,000 dollar millionaires hit \$2.66 trillion last year, making them the world's fourth largest group after the US, Japan and Germany.

The rise of this capitalist class was based on the de-collectivisation of agriculture and the sale or theft of state-owned industries at the expense of workers and peasants. Between 1998 and 2002, 60 million workers lost their jobs, including 20 million in collectively owned firms in rural townships. While a small segment of the rural population prospered, the majority were condemned to abject poverty, forcing millions to migrate to the cities to join the vastly expanded, super-exploited working class.

Like the Wukan villagers, workers cannot defend their interests other than through a rebellion—against management, the state-run unions and government. That requires the establishment of representative rank-and-file committees, the occupation of workplaces, and a turn to other sections of workers and the rural masses. The urban proletariat alone can provide political leadership to the peasantry in the fight, not to reform the CCP police state, but to abolish it on the basis of a genuine socialist perspective.

Such a struggle is necessarily international in

character. Any working class movement against the regime in Beijing would be opposed by the financial aristocracy in US, Europe and other advanced capitalist centres. Chinese workers would inevitably be compelled to turn to their class brothers and sisters throughout Asia and internationally for support. The indispensable theoretical guide for this political fight is Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which provides an integral strategy to unite workers in the backward and advanced capitalist countries.

To prepare for the coming upheavals, workers and youth in China need to absorb the lessons derived from the key strategic experiences of the international working class—including the 1925-27 and 1949 Chinese revolutions—by the international Trotskyist movement in its struggle against Stalinism and Maoism. That means building a new revolutionary leadership in the Chinese working class as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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