Chinese village protest gains wide support

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Heavy-handed police-state responses to protracted protests by thousands of farmers at Wukan village in China's Guangdong province have increasingly made the 20,000 villagers a national symbol of resistance against the Stalinist bureaucracy and the powerful corporate interests behind it.

Hundreds of paramilitary police armed with automatic weapons and water cannons sealed off the village throughout last week, cutting off food supplies for days. Despite this, the residents' struggle against the sale of collective farmland to real estate developers has attracted the sympathy of working people throughout the country. Neighbouring villages and town people are providing food and supplies to Wukan.

Last Friday, the *Wall Street Journal* reporter in Wukan explained: "Interviews with people living near Wukan, meanwhile, suggested widespread sympathy with the protesters there and anger over what the locals said were many similar cases of local officials misappropriating farmland, or failing to pay sufficient compensation for land seized."

Significantly, the unrest is drawing support from a section of the working class. Last Wednesday, a small demonstration in the provincial capital, Guangzhou, in solidarity with the Wukan villagers was quickly suppressed by the police. The crackdown revealed the Beijing regime's fear that the protests could trigger broader anti-government demonstrations, not only in rural areas, but in the province's manufacturing centres.

Last Sunday, three protesters handed out leaflets and attempted to make a public speech to call for mass support for the Wukan protests were arrested by police, according to a Agence France-Presse report. Yang Chong, a migrant worker from Jiangxi province, told the AFP: "I learned the news of Wukan from the Internet and I want to support the Wukan people. I support their action to defend their rights."

In September, violent protests erupted in Wukan against a corrupt deal by the village Communist Party committee to sell most of the collectively-owned land to a large pig farm operator, Lufeng Fengtian Livestock, owned by a former deputy chairman of the local Lufeng county government. The pig farm company recently sold the land to China's top developer, Country Garden. Many villagers had depended on fishing, but a shell-fishing company had eroded the traditional fishing waters. With their livelihoods ruined, villagers took up a collective struggle.

After the September protests, local Communist Party cadres fled, along with a few dozen affluent families living in multi-storey mansions. Villagers elected their own committee of representatives and patrolled the village with guards on motorbikes in order to prevent arrests of leading members. They cut down trees and placed other obstacles on roads, in order to prevent police from entering the village.

The authorities sent in anti-riot units to put down the initial protests in September. Then the villagers were asked to appoint 13 negotiators. The purpose, as it became obvious, was to allow the government to find out who were the key leaders. On December 9, four mini-buses of plainclothes agents drove into the village to size five representatives—followed by a deployment of 1,000 armed police. The local guards alerted the entire village, which mobilised to block the police. After two hours of attacking residents with tear gas and water cannons, the police retreated but set up a cordon around the village.

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Last Monday, the sudden death in police custody of Xue Jianwan—the elected leader of Wukan's representatives—provoked even greater anger. No one believed the government's claims that he died suddenly from a heart attack. Instead, the villagers alleged he was tortured to death.

In an attempt to placate the village, Shangwei prefecture acting mayor Wu Zili declared at a media conference last Wednesday that the authorities were willing to negotiate with the villagers. He promised to review the land deal, but also threatened to punish the key protest leaders. The mayor thundered: "The government will strike hard against ringleaders who organise, provoke and stir up unrest and carry out illegal crimes by smashing and destroying public property and hampering public services."

Far from being intimidated, some 7,000 villagers turned out to mourn Xue's death last Thursday. His daughter told the *South China Morning Post*: "The police accused my father of illegal petitioning and inciting social disorder. But he did nothing wrong. My father was taken away by some plainclothes people, with his hands tied." The secret police officers were likely to have been dispatched from Beijing's State Security Bureau.

The next day, over 6,000 villagers gathered at the centre of the village demanding the return of Xue's body within five days, or they would march to the Lufeng government headquarters. Lin Zuilian, a leader of the demonstration, demanded "democratic elections" not only in Wukan, but for the whole country. "We want democracy," he declared.

Far from offering "democratic rights," Beijing is still haunted by the spectre of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, when demands by students for democratic reforms opened a floodgate of working class opposition to the regime's program of capitalist restoration.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cannot tolerate a situation in which Wukan's resistance has generated admiration among millions of Internet users. The banners set up by the government near the village, "Safeguard stability against anarchy—Support the government!" reveal the anxiety in Beijing over the prospect of broader unrest.

An unnamed villager told Hong Kong's TVB on Sunday that more than 2,000 soldiers had moved into Lufeng township on Saturday night. He claimed it was unlikely that the authorities would use the army to suppress the villagers, "or it will provoke a national uprising or revolution," because the whole country and the world were watching. He insisted that the soldiers would only protect senior officials who may seek to visit the villagers, because "we are not against the party and the state, or seeking to divide the country."

Illusions in the Beijing regime clearly exist in Wukan, where banners have stated that the villagers are opposed to "corrupt officials," and asked the "party centre" to intervene to address their grievances. In reality, the deployment of the army, if confirmed, represents a grave danger to Wukan's population. The Stalinist police state ruthlessly defends the interests of the major capitalists, such as the billionaire owners of Country Garden, as well as their smaller rural partners, like the farm business owners connected with local party officials.

Beijing's concerns are amplified by the history of the region around Lufeng. It is known as the birthplace of China's modern peasant movement during the 1925-27 Chinese Revolution. An early CCP leader, Peng Pai, set up the first education centre there to organise peasants to rise up against landlords, as a mighty supplement to the working class uprising.

The rebellion at Wukan has become a clear indication that the CCP's restoration of capitalism has regenerated the explosive social contradictions that produced the great revolutionary upsurges of China's multi-million masses last century.

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