

China: Wukan protest shut down

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In a move to end 15 weeks of protest in Wukan village, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on January 15 appointed protest leader Lin Zuluan as the village's new party secretary. He replaces Xue Chang, a local businessman who had run the village for four decades but is now under investigation for corruption.

Lin will oversee new village elections. Despite promising "one person, one vote" and to run the village with democratic openness, his appointment came after the government branded as "illegal" the elections that the villagers held during their rebellion. Villagers have reportedly welcomed the official endorsement of their chosen leader, revealing illusions that Beijing is responding to their appeals for the "party centre" to address their grievances.

A tactic now often employed by the authorities in high-profile protests is to feign sympathy as long as the event captures public attention. The regime is mindful of growing social tensions as the economy has begun to slow and the potential for isolated protests to act as a trigger for broader discontent. Once public interest has been diverted, however, the regime turns on protest leaders. This could happen to Lin and others in Wukan.

Wukan's demonstrations erupted in September over the corrupt sale or lease of collective-owned land to a major developer by the former CCP leaders in Wukan, threatening the livelihoods of the 13,000 residents. Villagers drove away the officials and police, and then elected their own administrative body. The authorities initially reacted by sending in thousands of paramilitary police to quell the unrest, in the hope of forcing Wukan into submission. (Click here to see the demonstrations on December 15.)

But Wukan's struggles attracted solidarity from nearby industrial workers and gained support not only in China, but internationally, forcing the government to back off

from taking control of the village by force. Moreover, the CCP leaders were nervous because the region (Lufeng county and nearby Haifeng county) is known as the birthplace of the peasant movement in 1925-27 Second Chinese Revolution.

Wukan's struggle came at a bitter price. A protest leader, Xue Jinbo, died in police custody last month. Another man, one of Lin's relatives, committed suicide on December 28, after receiving threatening demands from local authorities to turn himself in because of his involvement in the protests.

The demonstrations ended on December 21 when the Guangdong provincial authorities reportedly promised an inquiry into the villagers' grievances and halted the development projects on their land.

However, Yang Semaoy, a deputy of Lin, told the *New York Times* last Monday that the provincial authorities had promised to return only a quarter of the land that was sold or leased. Meanwhile, the Lufeng county government refused to drop criminal charges against three other protest leaders. The Lufeng government has also refused to release Xue's body to his family until they sign documents declaring that his death was due to natural causes, not police brutality. The authorities have further rejected the family's request to view the video from a surveillance camera monitoring Xue's cell.

Amid the public outcry last month, Premier Wen Jiabao urged officials at a "national rural works meeting" to look after the interests of the peasantry. "We can no longer sacrifice farmers' land ownership rights to reduce the costs of urbanisation and industrialisation," he declared. "We must significantly increase farmers' gains from the increase in land value."

The reality is that the entire economy has become dependent on a property bubble driven by the rampant

speculation of major developers, local governments and other businesses. During 2010, local governments raked in \$460 billion from land sales, seeking to repay the debts totalling \$1.7 trillion they incurred as part of Beijing's huge stimulus package following the 2008 global financial crisis.

The roots of these processes lie in the Stalinist regime's restoration of capitalist relations since the 1970s. Local governments were established in China after the dismantling of the collectivised agricultural communes in the early 1980s. These apparatuses, operating in collusion with business interests and even gangsters, have expropriated peasant land, driving millions into the cities as cheap labour.

Guangdong's deputy CCP secretary, Zhu Mingguo, who brokered the peace with Wukan villagers, acknowledged at a meeting on December 26 that social tensions in rural areas have become "like an apple rotten to the core." He added: "On the outside, the skin is red, but once broken open the mess can't be cleaned up."

Zhu warned that "managing the masses is becoming more and more difficult" because "the public's awareness of democracy, equality and rights is continually getting stronger, and as a result their demands are growing."

The dilemma for the regime is that even the limited concessions made to the Wukan villagers will encourage others to rise up.

Guangdong CCP secretary Wang Yang has been praised within the ruling bureaucracy for the "peaceful" settlement of the Wukan dispute. Last Monday he published a lengthy article in the party journal *Seeking Truth*, declaring that in the face of a popular awakening, demanding democratic and social rights, "the government should cater to the public when drafting public policies."

Just after Wang's article was published, 1,000 farmers from Wanggang village near Guangzhou—the capital of Guangdong—rallied in front of the Guangzhou city government headquarters last Tuesday. They demanded that the provincial People's Congress, which was meeting inside the compound, rectify land sales by their village secretary Li Zhihang, who reportedly pocketed 400 million yuan (\$60 million). Carrying colourful flags and banners, they threatened to create "a second Wukan" if

their demands were not met.

Guangdong—a major manufacturing base—has also witnessed a series of militant strikes by workers since November, in response to a concerted assault on wages, conditions and jobs, driven by falling exports to US and European markets.

In the latest outbreak, 4,000 workers at Sanyo Electric in Shenzhen staged a strike on January 14 and clashed with the police over lack of compensation after the firm was sold. Last Monday, 8,000 workers at the Japanese-owned Foster Electric plant in Nanning, the capital of the neighbouring Guangxi province, went on strike against the cancellation of year-end bonuses and a lack of sufficient leave for migrant workers to go home for the Chinese New Year.

The supposedly "peaceful" settlement of the Wukan protest will not resolve the crisis facing the Chinese regime. Despite being largely isolated and spontaneous, any of the rising number of protests and strikes has the potential to become a focal point for a much wider movement among the multi-million working class and rural poor.

For the working class and rural masses, the crucial issue is the development of a genuine socialist perspective which is aimed not at pressuring the Beijing regime for concessions, but abolishing it and establishing a workers' and peasants government as part of the struggle for socialism internationally. That is the program of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement.



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