

Oppose Chinese and Japanese nationalism

John Chan**21 September 2012**

As the worsening global economic breakdown impacts North East Asia, the Chinese and Japanese governments are deliberately stirring up chauvinist sentiment over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islets in the East China Sea in order to divert mounting economic and social tensions at home. In this heated atmosphere, the danger is that any incident, whether intended or not, could spark a broader conflict.

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda provoked the current standoff by proclaiming last week that his government had completed the purchase of the islands from their private Japanese owners. Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara had earlier made the issue a cause célèbre in right-wing nationalist circles by calling for donations to buy the islands.

Noda announced his “nationalisation” plan on July 7—the anniversary of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937 that marked the beginning of Japan’s full-scale invasion of China. The timing was calculated to appeal to the reactionary defenders of Japanese militarism despite the obvious offense that it would give to Chinese people, who suffered terrible wartime atrocities.

Noda’s resort to Japanese nationalism is a desperate attempt to deflect mounting opposition in the working class. His public support fell to less than 20 percent after his government passed a law to double the consumption tax, placing new burdens on working people. Protests involving hundreds of thousands of people, the largest in decades in Japan, erupted against his decision to restart Japan’s nuclear plants after the Fukushima disaster.

In response to widespread anti-Japanese protests in China over the past week, the Japanese media has

declared that these “mobs” threaten the Japanese nation. The government has mobilised half the coast guard and has put the Japanese navy on alert to repel or detain any Chinese fishing boats entering Japanese waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

The Noda government is acting with the tacit encouragement of the Obama administration, which has stepped up its diplomatic and military pressure on China throughout Asia. During his tour of the region this week, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta hypocritically appealed for calm by both Japan and China. Washington claims not to be taking sides in the island dispute, but says that it would be compelled to back Japan in any military conflict over the islets.

The anti-Japanese protests in China, which were given the green light by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), are no less reactionary. They are dominated by affluent sections of the middle classes, who see their future as bound up with the expansion of China as a capitalist power and are deeply hostile to the working class in both China and Japan. This is reflected in their slogan “boycott Japanese goods” which in effect, serves to boost Chinese enterprises at the expense of Japanese companies.

The protests in China have an overtly racist character, with many banners and slogans condemning “Japanese dogs” and “little Japan,” not to mention random attacks on Japanese nationals in China. Most provocative were calls for the Chinese government to “declare war on Japan” and banners with a nuclear mushroom cloud over Japan. These militaristic sentiments have been directly encouraged by Chinese media commentators and army officers, who boasted on TV that if war broke out China could play its “trump card”—a nuclear strike on Japan. This barbaric proposal is nothing less than a

recipe for global nuclear conflict, as such an attack on Japan would immediately involve the US.

The resort to Chinese nationalism has a history. As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime initiated its program of capitalist restoration in the 1980s and increasingly jettisoned its socialist phrase-mongering, it turned to Chinese patriotism as a means of creating a social base in the emerging middle classes. All these processes accelerated following the crushing of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Like the slogans on the anti-Japanese protests, the CCP's propaganda is based on an essentially racist outlook. The state media deliberately fosters hatred toward all Japanese by continually asserting that Japanese society as whole was responsible for the terrible war crimes committed during World War II and earlier colonial wars in Asia.

In fact, Japanese workers and rural poor suffered no less under Japan's militaristic regime than the Chinese masses. The organised labour movement and political opposition were ruthlessly suppressed and millions of young men dragooned into the army to serve as cannon fodder for the ambitions of Japanese imperialism. Such is the depth of hostility to Japanese militarism among working people that even today the government confronts profound difficulties in removing the so-called "pacifist" clause from the country's constitution.

Like their counterparts in Tokyo, the Chinese leaders are promoting chauvinism to try to deflect deepening social discontent with their own regime. The economy, which depends heavily on exports to, and investment from, Japan as well as the US and Europe, is being battered by recessionary trends in all the major capitalist centers. Already sluggish exports, which account for a quarter of China's gross domestic product and 200 million jobs, would be hit even harder if Japanese corporations pulled out of the country.

In the face of large-scale social unrest, the CCP bureaucracy would not hesitate to unite with international capital, including the Japanese corporate elite, to crush its "own" working class—as it did during

the 1989 protests. The allies of Chinese workers are their class brothers and sisters in Japan and internationally, not the CCP regime that defends its own privileges and those of the Chinese capitalist class.

Japanese and Chinese workers face common oppressors, in some cases the very same global corporations. They must reject the nationalism and militarism promoted by their ruling classes and turn to a socialist and internationalist perspective. Only a socialist movement, based on unifying the working class to abolish the profit system, can eliminate the dangers of war in Asia and the world. This means building sections of the International Committee of Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, in both China and Japan.

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