

Anti-Chinese protests erupt in Vietnam's industrial zones

Peter Symonds
16 May 2014

Violent anti-Chinese protests in industrial zones near Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City have resulted in the gutting of dozens of foreign-owned factories and the deaths of at least two people. The protests, reportedly involving thousands of workers, began on Tuesday and followed small government-sanctioned rallies last weekend outside Chinese diplomatic offices.

The Vietnamese regime is waging a campaign against the installation of a Chinese oil rig on May 2 in disputed waters near the Chinese-controlled Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. Vietnamese ships have repeatedly challenged the presence of the oil rig, leading to collisions with Chinese vessels defending the area. Both sides have used water cannon against opposing ships.

This week's protests near Ho Chi Minh City not only targeted Chinese-owned enterprises but also Taiwanese, South Korean, Japanese and Malaysian plants. Mobs ransacked and burned factories on Tuesday and Wednesday, leaving many in ruins.

A large group of protesters stormed a Taiwanese steel mill in the central Ha Tinh province, driving out Chinese employees. According to a statement by the mill owner, Formosa Plastics, 90 Chinese were injured and one died of heat stroke. A Reuters report put the death toll at more 20, including five Vietnamese workers.

Taiwan's DDK Group, which manufactures bike parts, reported that a Chinese technician choked to death after one of its plants was set on fire.

The Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Ho Chi Minh City stated that around 200 Taiwanese companies were affected by the protests. The South Korean foreign ministry reported that 50 Korean-owned factories were damaged.

The Vietnamese regime has launched a crackdown.

Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung sent an emergency letter to the police ministry, calling for foreign businesses to be protected and "bad people" who broke the law to be punished. At the same time, he declared that protests against the "illegal oil rig" were "legitimate." He urged people to "contribute to the nation to protect our sovereign territory, following national and international law."

Provincial official Tran Van Nam was cited in the media as saying about 19,000 workers were involved in the protests. He claimed late on Wednesday that the situation was stable and 447 people were arrested. However, the Taiwanese chamber of commerce in Vietnam stated: "The government ... has dispatched riot police but they are badly outnumbered by the protesters."

Chinese and Taiwanese business people were leaving Vietnam, with many waiting for hours at Ho Chi Minh City's international airport for a ticket. Cambodian officials said more than 600 people thought to be Chinese citizens had entered from Vietnam, at one of the border crossings between the two countries.

The xenophobic anti-Chinese atmosphere being whipped up by the government may have provided the initial spark for the protests, but their scope reflects deep social tensions. Analyst Yen Chen-shen from Taiwan's National Chengchi University told the *Wall Street Journal*: "The influx of foreign companies in Vietnam in recent years has widened the wealth gap there. For the locals, the prices have gone up, but wages haven't caught up. Although the protest is about China's oil rig, the core anger and fear is against foreign exploitation of their country."

The Stalinist regime in Hanoi is acutely aware of the underlying resentment and anger, not only over wages but the exploitative conditions in foreign and locally

owned enterprises alike. It has acted quickly to try to stamp out unrest, fearing that it could spiral out of control and be directed against the government.

The Chinese government directly accused the Vietnamese government of sanctioning the protests, and demanded protection for Chinese-owned businesses. The violence, a foreign ministry spokeswoman declared, had “a direct link with the Vietnamese side’s indulgence and connivance in recent days with some domestic anti-China forces and lawbreakers.”

Beijing has also blamed the Obama administration for fomenting tensions in the South China Sea by pushing countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines to more aggressively assert their claims in territorial disputes with China.

At a joint press conference in Washington yesterday with US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, General Martin Dempsey, China’s military chief, General Fang Fenghui, declared: “We believe that the ones that are provoking those issues in the South China Sea [are] not China, but certain countries that are attempting to gain their own interests, because they believe that... the United States is adopting this Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy.”

The US “rebalance” or “pivot” to Asia is an all-embracing diplomatic, economic and military strategy aimed at subordinating China and maintaining American domination throughout the region. The Obama administration has directly intervened in what were previously localised disputes between China and its neighbours by declaring that it has a “national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” through the South China Sea.

While previously declaring itself “neutral” in the territorial disputes, Washington has since the start of the year begun openly questioning the legitimacy of China’s claims in the South China Sea. At the same time, it has assisted the Philippines in mounting a legal challenge to Beijing in the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea. Behind the scenes, the US is seeking to marshal regional and international support for the Philippines and encouraging other countries to lodge their own cases.

The Obama administration’s campaign is being accompanied by a rising drumbeat in the American media of accusations of Chinese “expansionism” and

demands for tougher US action. A *Washington Post* editorial this week, entitled “Drilling for Trouble,” lamented the lack of a US response to “a Beijing power play in the South China Sea.” While supporting legal action by Vietnam and the Philippines, it concluded China would “continue to act unilaterally in the region until it meets concerted resistance, whether diplomatic or military.”

In reality, the aggressor is US imperialism. As part of its “rebalance,” the US is boosting naval and air power throughout Asia, forging closer ties with allies such as Japan, Australia and the Philippines, and building military exchanges with Vietnam. Washington has just signed a military basing agreement with the Philippines that provides access for US forces to bases directly adjacent to the South China Sea.

With active US encouragement, the Philippine government has manufactured a series of provocations—the most recent being the detention and threatened prosecution of the crew of a Chinese fishing boat for allegedly hunting sea turtles, and the accusation made on Wednesday that China is secretly building a military facility on the disputed Johnson South Reef.

Any one of these provocations could become the pretext for a reckless US confrontation in the South China Sea.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact