

Political lessons of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in China

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On June 4, 1989, the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party regime carried out the bloody suppression of the months-long occupation of Beijing's Tiananmen Square by students and workers. Independent analysts estimate that as many as 6,000 were killed and tens of thousands injured during the brutal crackdown in the square and surrounding working-class suburbs by 40,000 heavily-armed troops, tanks and armoured vehicles. Bloody reprisals against students and workers throughout China continued in the weeks and months that followed.

While the initial student protests began with calls for democratic reform in April of that year, opposition rapidly spread as sections of the working class and urban poor in Beijing and other cities began raising their own demands. An estimated 100 million people in 400 cities were involved in what became a nation-wide upsurge against the Stalinist Communist Party (CCP) regime.

Contrary to Beijing's claim that the mass protests were a "counter-revolutionary rebellion," the broad-based movement was driven by deep opposition to rapidly increasing social inequality and bureaucratic profiteering created by the CCP's embrace of the capitalist market in 1978.

The US, Britain, Germany and other imperialist powers condemned the Tiananmen Square massacre, falsely equating the reactionary Chinese Stalinist regime with communism and socialism. Although the 1949 Chinese revolution ended direct imperialist domination and nationalised key sections of industry, leading to major social gains for the working class: the CCP was not a working-class Marxist party. On the contrary, the Maoist bureaucracy defended its own privileged existence on the basis of the reactionary nationalist program of "socialism in a single country," which produced one economic disaster after another—from the Great Leap Forward in 1958 to the so-called Cultural Revolution in 1966, characterised by mass repression of the working class—and led inevitably to the restoration of capitalism and the opening up of the country to imperialist exploitation.

The bloody suppression of the Tiananmen Square movement and associated protests, in fact, became a clear signal from Beijing to international finance capital that the police-military apparatus would guarantee investments against any challenge by the working class.

Global capitalism, notwithstanding its initial crocodile tears over the brutal crackdown, responded accordingly. A new flood of capital poured into China, with foreign direct investment inflows increasing from \$4 billion in 1991 to \$45 billion in 1997. At the same time, the CCP accelerated its program of capitalist restoration, transforming China into the largest cheap labour platform in the world and further enriching the country's new bourgeoisie.

While the CCP crushed the Tiananmen Square movement and continues each year to mobilise its police state apparatus to prevent any commemoration of the event, arresting anyone—journalists, artists, students or workers—it fears may attempt to publicly refer to its brutal history, the Chinese government remains a regime of crisis.

Massive foreign investment and the integration of the Chinese economy into globalised capitalism have only heightened the social and political contradictions that gave rise to the massacre in the first place. Growth levels have slumped, unemployment is rising and total government, corporate and household debt continues to soar as a percentage of gross domestic product.

Social inequality is extreme and rapidly widening. The Chinese capitalist class has enriched itself at the direct expense of the now 400-million strong working class. Strikes and protests have increased dramatically, with walkouts involving tens of thousands of workers erupting at Honda, Foxconn and hundreds of other transnational corporations.

While these disputes have centred on wages, working conditions and jobs, the spectre of Tiananmen Square and a politically radicalised working class continues to haunt Beijing. That is why the CCP spent more money on internal policing than on the military in the three years following the global financial crisis.

The crucial task facing Chinese workers, students and youth is the building of a genuine revolutionary leadership in the Chinese working class, which will seek to unite their struggles with those of the international working class.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is republishing below an article written by James Conachy, that originally appeared on the 10th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. This analysis, which details the economic and political factors that produced the mass eruption of 1989, retains its validity today. It is of vital importance for the political clarification of the Chinese working class and the fight to establish a Chinese section of the International Committee of the Fourth International—the world Trotskyist movement—in preparation for the revolutionary struggles that lie immediately ahead.

Ten years since the Tiananmen Square massacre *Political lessons for the working class*

By James Conachy
[4 June 1999]

The news broadcasts on this day 10 years ago were filled with the images of tanks, blood and death on the streets of Beijing.

As the night fell on June 3, 1989, 40,000 soldiers of the 27th People's Liberation Army moved into China's capital with orders to crush six weeks of demonstrations and protests by the country's students and workers, and end their demands for political change.

In the preceding weeks, China, and Beijing in particular, had witnessed extraordinary events. A student occupation of Tiananmen Square became the focus for a rising working class movement. Independent Workers' Autonomous Federations were active in numbers of cities. From May 20 the movement continued in defiance of martial law and the central government was divided and paralysed.

The paralysis was short-lived. Accounts by witnesses testify to the

calculated terror employed by the military as it reclaimed the capital:

“... at one command, the soldiers raised their guns and fired one round at the residents and students, who fell to the ground. As soon as the gunshots stopped, other people rushed forward to rescue the wounded. The steps of a clinic near Xidan were already covered in blood. But the struggle at the intersection did not stop. Armoured vehicles ran over roadblocks, knocked over cars and buses. The unarmed people had only bricks ... What they got in return was bullets ... People dispersed and ran for their lives. Soldiers ran after them, guns blazing. Even when residents ran into courtyards or into the shrubbery, the soldiers would catch up with them and kill them.”

[1]

“... Thick smoke and tear gas were bringing tears to everyone’s eyes. I met F. who told me how the first tanks had crushed the barricades, knocking people off the tops of buses that soon caught fire. By now the way was clear for trucks to move east one by one, the slowness of their advance suggesting that there must be battles somewhere ahead. The whole city of Peking seemed in a state of outrage and extreme agitation. On the side-streets off Changan Avenue, thousands of us rhythmically shouted in the intervals between gunfire: ‘You animals!’ ‘Li Peng—fascist!’ and ‘Go on strike!’ But the troops shot back, killing those who were not swift enough to squat down or move away or who simply took no heed of bullets. People were constantly falling to the ground and being taken to a nearby hospital, but the mood of indignation completely overwhelmed any feelings of fear.” [2]

“... many hundreds of people (not only students) appeared on the street. They ran after the trucks and shouted protest slogans. A few stones were thrown. The soldiers opened fire with live ammunition. The crowd threw themselves on the ground, but quickly followed the convoy again. The more shots were fired, the more the crowd got determined and outraged. Suddenly they started singing the *Internationale*; they armed themselves with stones and threw them towards the soldiers. There were also a few Molotov cocktails and the last truck was set on fire.” [3]

Such testimonies could be recounted a thousand-fold by the working class of Beijing. In their tens of thousands they used their bodies to reinforce the barricades and roadblocks that they had erected to defend their city and their political aims. Hundreds were gunned down on the streets, crushed beneath armoured vehicles or beaten or bayoneted to death as they sought to stem the advancing troops. Casualties were highest in the working class residential suburbs to the east and west of the Tiananmen Square. The exact number killed that night has never been tallied, but estimates range up to 7,000, with over 20,000 wounded.

To this day the Chinese government justifies its actions with the same contemptible lie put forward at the time by the 85-year-old “paramount leader” of Chinese Stalinism, Deng Xiaoping. In a speech on June 9, 1989, he denounced the movement his regime had drowned in blood as a reactionary “counter-revolutionary rebellion” aimed at the overthrow of the socialist system.

However there is no historical or factual substance to the claims that the Tiananmen Square massacre was the result of a confrontation between a communist government and a pro-capitalist movement. They can only be made by ignoring both the true nature of the Stalinist regime that ruled China and the complex character and demands of the movement that developed in China through the month of May 1989.

While there is no question that the vast majority of students and workers had illusions in Western-style democracy, they also held deep allegiances to the principles of social equality and social justice.

The movement of 1989 expressed the long pent-up discontent and hatred of a corrupt Stalinist bureaucracy that for 40 years had betrayed the hopes of the Chinese people for a truly just society, and for over a decade had been imposing a market economy on China, giving rise to unprecedented inequality and burgeoning new capitalist elite.

The new bourgeoisie

Underlying the social tensions in 1989 was the economic and political impasse at which the Stalinist perspective of national self-sufficiency or “socialism in a single country” had arrived.

Leon Trotsky described the ruling bureaucracy of the Soviet Union as the “policemen of inequality.” The description is just as applicable to the bureaucracy spawned by Mao Zedong’s peasant movement after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China.

Regulating the state-controlled production of a backward economy and protecting it from competition or penetration by the industry and commodities of the advanced capitalist centres—and ruthlessly suppressing any challenge to their grip on power from the working class—was a sizeable social caste of party and state officials. Their rule was based primarily on the peasant Red Army, and they were able to derive material privileges and benefits that, while not resting on any ownership of property, elevated them above the rest of society.

The 1980s witnessed the turn by the Stalinist bureaucracies in the USSR, Eastern Europe and China, confronting economic stagnation and collapse, to preserve their material interests through the restoration of private property relations and the re-integration of their countries into the world capitalist market—a perspective accomplished through the systematic destruction of the social gains and conditions of the mass of the population.

The prospect of capitalist restoration was celebrated throughout the capitalist west. Figures such as Mikhail Gorbachev, the head of the Soviet Union, and Deng Xiaoping in China, were feted as great visionaries and reformers. The Russian expressions *perestroika* (economic reform) and *glasnost* (political reform) were repeated in the mass media so often that they became household words. In 1985 both *Time* magazine and the *National Review* named Deng “man of the year.”

From 1979, Deng oversaw a stream of market reforms that opened up large parts of the country to the activities of transnational corporations and other private firms in Special Economic Zones, broke-up collective farms and reinstituted private control of land in the countryside, and abandoned central economic regulation and planning.

By the mid-1980s prices for a wide array of industrial and consumer products were being set by market forces and a “free market” of labour was in the process of being created through the ending of full employment guarantees, the undermining of life-time employment to workers employed by state-owned enterprises and the growth of the non-state sector of the economy.

The effect of the reforms was to enable a frenzy of wealth accumulation by the state and party bureaucrats, who were in a position to allocate land and contracts to themselves, establish business niches or engage in wholesale bribery and theft. Utilising their political power and connections, the “cadre” of the Communist Party established themselves as an incipient capitalist class by the end of the 1980s.

A 1984 survey in one rural province, for example, found that party members made up 43 percent of the “prosperous” households, a figure that did not include their friends or associates. [4] A glimpse into how the party cadre became prosperous during the parceling-out of collective property is recounted in the study *Chen Village*:

“As party secretary, Qingfa got the lion’s share. There was a large grove of giant bamboo along the river; and rather than put it up for bidding, the [Party] committee agreed to let Qingfa take it for ten yuan. The grove was worth a hundred times that amount. He allocated to himself, free of charge, a hillock of honeysuckle planted in earlier years for the health clinic. He had the brigade rent bulldozers to relevel the land occupied by an unfinished dyke. Awarding himself the major portion of this land, he hired field hands to till it for him.” [5]

The spawning of a new rural bourgeoisie was overshadowed in the urban areas by far more lucrative opportunities, especially in ties and partnerships with foreign capital in the Special Economic Zones. Over 10,000 companies had what the British *Economist* journal described as “privileged links with party bureaucrats. Of these 134 can boast top officials—ministers or their equivalents—on their payroll.”

Most conspicuous were the children of the highest-ranking government officials, who were soon given the title of the “crown princes.” The sons of Deng Xiaoping and of Zhao Ziyang, the premier of China, were only the most prominent “crown princes” who by the late 1980s were associated with trading corporations that used state-derived funds for real estate speculation or the purchase and re-sale into the domestic economy of scarce consumer goods produced in or imported into the Special Economic Zones—with the profits flowing to highly-praised “socialist entrepreneurs.”

Facilitating the process was an orgy of borrowing by both national and regional governments, which pushed China’s foreign debt from next to nothing in 1979 to over \$US50 billion in 1990.

Liu Binyan, a Chinese investigative journalist, described 1988—the year in which all of China’s coastal provinces were opened to the activities of private capital and bank credit controls were lifted—as the time when “members of the bureaucratic stratum, high and low, who had a firm grasp on their special privileges, initiated an unprecedented plundering of the Chinese economy, arrogating billions in public assets to themselves.” [6]

The impact of market reforms

As the bureaucracy enriched itself, most of China’s population suffered the erosion of income security, social supports and purchasing power.

The breakup of the collectives and the odious allocation of property led to millions of former peasants being made landless. By 1989, unable to find employment in rural areas, more than 50 million people, mainly younger workers, were on a massive internal migration to the urban areas and Special Economic Zones for work. By the late 1980s grain production had begun to fall to crisis levels as entrepreneurs in the countryside converted land to other, more profitable uses.

The ending of central planning and price controls wrought havoc upon the Chinese working people. In a climate of rampant profiteering, hoarding, speculation and the uncontrolled growth in the money supply, the country was plagued with permanent inflation and shortages of foodstuffs and essential items.

In March 1988, party head Zhao Ziyang declared that the Chinese people had to “learn to swim in the sea of the commodity economy.” By the end of that year it was clear they were drowning.

The money supply had increased a staggering 50 percent in less than 12 months. The official inflation rate reached 19 percent—over 30 percent in the cities—and unemployment was growing. Industry was beset with shortages of energy and raw materials, leading to frequent shutdowns of plants and equipment. Agricultural production had fallen for the third year in a row, requiring the massive import of grain. National debt was spiraling out of control.

Faced with record budget and trade deficits as the direct result of its own policies, the central government imposed emergency austerity measures in the last months of 1988, which reversed the easy credit policies and slashed public spending. Across China the debt-driven boom of construction and industrial development collapsed, firms laid off workers and sought to cut wages and benefits, and governments at all levels reduced funding on education and social services.

In wide layers of the population this was the final blow to any lingering

illusions in the market reforms or confidence in the regime. As 1988 ended, police reports were warning of “alarming increases” in workers’ strikes and public gatherings. All that was needed for a general social movement against the regime was the spark provided by the student movement of April 1989.

Origins of the 1989 student movement

The major influences that shaped the student movement of 1989 can be traced back a decade earlier. After vigorously suppressing intellectual layers that attacked Stalinism from the left, the regime encouraged public debate that drew pro-market conclusions and lent ideological support to the reforms being undertaken. The general policy pursued by the state apparatus in the 1980s was to draw under its wings the educated and professional layers with the promise of improved living standards and heightened prestige—but not democracy.

Acutely conscious that the market reforms would heighten the ever-present conflict between the bureaucracy and the working class, the dominant factions within the Stalinist party were resolute that any undermining of dictatorial rule would produce a power vacuum that could be filled by a challenge to its rule from below. The Solidarity movement in Poland during 1980-81 reinforced their fears.

Yet for considerable elements of the professional and intellectual petty-bourgeoisie, the market reforms did not deliver on the promises. Many had joined the ruling party, yet the parceling out of wealth took place amongst the established bureaucracy far faster than they could climb its ranks, and the inflation and economic turmoil affected all social layers.

Though genuinely outraged at the rampant enrichment of the upper echelons of the bureaucracy, the hopes for political reforms that emanated from the middle strata were intimately bound up with aspirations for a greater stake in the direction and benefits of capitalist restoration. The objective content of calls for freedom of the press and association were to establish weapons with which to curb the ability of the state apparatus to monopolise control over the emerging market economy and force it to open the door for other layers.

The demands for democracy were not therefore directed toward mobilising the Chinese masses, who in the final analysis the democrats feared as much as the regime, but to factions within the bureaucracy that sympathised with their aims and would promote their cause. This intellectual and political outlook exerted a heavy influence upon the students in 1989, the vast majority of whom were the children of either party officials or the professional petty-bourgeoisie.

The death on April 15, 1989 of the former party leader Hu Yaobang, who had been removed from office two years earlier after lending support to student protests for reform, provided the impulse for the expression of social grievances.

“The one who should not die, died. Those who should die, live,” became a popular slogan on the university campuses where the discontent about the direction of society was most radically expressed. Memorial meetings extolling the virtues of Hu Yaobang as compared to his counterparts, soon gave way to calls for increases in the education budget, a free press, the right to form student associations independent of the Communist Party and the rehabilitation of intellectuals discredited for various digressions.

The means for expressing the demands almost naturally became daily rallies in the symbolic centre of political protest in China—the massive Tiananmen Square in the heart of Beijing, which was the site of state monuments and around which the major government buildings were located.

After days of protests, and in defiance of an edict prohibiting the public from the square for the funeral of Hu Yaobang on April 22, tens of thousands of students filled the grounds of Tiananmen bearing banners demanding democratic reforms and an explanation as to why Hu Yaobang had been removed as party secretary-general.

Their demands were ignored. Increasingly radicalised, student representatives from 21 universities and colleges met the following day and formed the Autonomous Federation of Beijing University Students. A student strike was declared and a call made for the people to join them in demonstrations at Tiananmen Square until the government recognised and met with the student organisation.

Workers Autonomous Federation

Alongside the students, the embryo of another movement had emerged, of a very different character and with very different political aims. Among the 100,000 people who assembled in Tiananmen Square on April 22 for Hu Yaobang's funeral were the groups of young industrial workers who on April 20 had founded the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation (*Gongzilian*).

The appearance of an independent workers' organisation was announced in two leaflets distributed in the square on that day. They directly addressed the class divide that separated the ruling regime and the working class.

One leaflet attacked the personal wealth of Deng Xiaoping's children, among other condemnations of the privileges of the bureaucracy, and called for an explanation of the "shortcomings" of the economic reforms. The other denounced the "steady decline of the people's living standards" which it blamed on the "long term control of a dictatorial bureaucracy" and demanded the stabilisation of prices. It concluded with the demand that would resonate widely amongst China's workers—that the true wealth and incomes of government officials, and the sources of that wealth, be made public.

The appearance of the Workers Autonomous Federation, calling for a frontal assault on the privileges and positions of the apparatus, posed the very real threat to the regime in China of the "Polish model"—a mass working class movement challenging the very existence of Stalinist rule.

All party heads agreed that the student marches and demonstrations had to be brought to an end, especially the tentative efforts to bring into political activity wider layers of society. The cracks in state control and authority made by the students were early warnings of a flood of working class discontent.

On April 26 the government banned all demonstrations and rallies without approval, outlawed the making of speeches and the distribution of leaflets, and warned students against "going to factories, rural areas and schools." The editorial in the state mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*, defended the government stance with the headline: "It is necessary to take a clear stand against disturbances." The editorial, which some claim was personally dictated by Deng Xiaoping, specifically referred to the accusations made against party leaders in the workers' leaflets of April 22 as a "planned conspiracy" to overthrow the government, "taking advantage" of the genuine mourning of Hu Yaobang by the students.

The government decrees and the insinuation that the students were the puppets of other forces were met with anger and further defiance. Over 80,000 students from dozens of campuses marched to Tiananmen Square on April 27. In answer to the warning against going to the factories, student groups dispersed from the square into the residential suburbs and staged street rallies late into the evening. Calls were made for a mass rally on May 4 to demonstrate for the demands of the student organisation.

A new element appeared in the march of April 27. Not only did large crowds of enthusiastic residents of Beijing line the streets to applaud and show support, but tens of thousands of workers marched alongside or behind the students. The events stunned the central government—both the defiance of the students and the sheer scope of the popular support they had been able to harness so rapidly. Their effect was to divide the regime as a raging internal conflict broke out over how best to diffuse the situation.

One faction, personified in Deng Xiaoping, called for the deployment of troops to restore order, a position that did not win immediate support. Layers of the state bureaucracy, led by the secretary-general of the Communist party, Zhao Ziyang, advocated making concessions to the students and the middle classes in order to build a base of support against the mounting opposition to the market reforms within the industrial working class.

Their model was Russia where Gorbachev, through the promises of *glasnost*, or political reforms, had consolidated the support of Russian intellectuals and professional layers for the restoration of the market. With Gorbachev scheduled to arrive in China on May 15 in the first visit of a Soviet leader for 30 years, Zhao Ziyang's call for negotiations with the students prevailed.

The regime not only met with student representatives, but informed the media it had the freedom to cover the student movement. A debate between a high-ranking official and a student leader was televised live on national television. University budgets were increased. In a token gesture to placate the anger over official corruption, the import of limousines was banned. The issues raised by the students were elevated to the centre of political discussion in China.

The one demand on which the regime would not give any ground was that of recognising autonomous student organisations. To do so would legitimise the movements in the working class to establish independent trade unions and political associations.

In undertaking its concessions, the Stalinist bureaucracy based itself on the fact that in the main the students were the children of, and heirs to, the bureaucratic elite or the middle classes that aspired to enjoy similar privileges. From the standpoint of their class interests, a sizeable layer of students viewed with concern the increasing political activity of the working class.

Among intellectuals and students, Zhao Ziyang was being hailed as the possible Chinese Gorbachev. The march to Tiananmen Square on May 4 therefore had the character of a victory celebration gone wrong. The fact that 250,000 workers joined 60,000 students produced turmoil in the student movement. Distraught at the growing appearance on the streets of the working class, who drew no distinctions between different elements of the bureaucracy and directed their slogans against the social inequality caused by the market, a section of the students withdrew from political activity.

Hunger strike

From May 4 a clear split took place among the students. New personalities came to the fore, such as Wang Dan, Chai Ling and Wuer Kaixi. Just as Zhao Ziyang believed he could use the students, they believed that the mass support of the population could be used as a lever to extract greater concessions and recognition from the state.

As the means of applying the maximum pressure and gaining the maximum exposure, the students adopted the proposal of psychology graduate Chai Ling who modeled herself on Mahatma Gandhi. She proposed a hunger strike by students at the monument to the Heroes of the

Revolution in the centre of Tiananmen Square, where Gorbachev was scheduled to lay a wreath on May 15 under the full gaze of the world media.

On May 13, 500 students marched into Tiananmen Square and set up tents at the monument to begin their public hunger strike. In doing so they initiated what has been called the “Beijing Spring” and compared by some with the Paris Commune of 1871.

As the broader student movement began to dissipate, the working class of China adopted the student hunger strike as the focus for mass anti-government protest. By May 15 half a million students, workers and other Beijing residents had rallied in the square. The character of the political movement in China qualitatively shifted to the left and was defined by the mass actions of the industrial working class and the growing role of the Workers Autonomous Federations.

From the time of its inception, the Beijing or Capital Workers Autonomous Federation, as it renamed itself, had conducted agitation, visiting factories to win support and recruit members. It had participated in the marches of April 27 and May 4, but out of caution, had not done so under an independent banner.

The decision by the students to occupy Tiananmen Square enabled the Federation to begin a public life in relative safety. Establishing a tent headquarters in the square’s north-east fringe, it engaged in continuous propaganda among the ever-growing numbers of workers who came into the Square seeking political discussion and organisation.

The week of May 13-20 saw the largest demonstrations in China’s post-war history. On May 17 it is estimated that up to two million people marched through the centre of Beijing; the majority being workers and their families who walked beneath the banners of their work unit or enterprise; students from across China; peasants from nearby rural regions; teachers, public servants and journalists.

Thousands of workers joined the Workers Federation. A steady stream of delegates from factories and work units came to its headquarters to collect literature and donate funds. By the end of May it had 150 full-time organisers in Tiananmen Square, had adopted a constitution, elected leadership committees, established a workers guard to protect the students, was operating a printing facility and had erected a public broadcasting system that each evening drew massive crowds to hear political speeches. A treatise distributed in that week sums up the political outlook they expressed:

“The tyranny of the corrupt officials is nothing short of extreme ... The people will no longer believe the lies of the authorities for on our banners appear the words: science, democracy, freedom, human rights and rule by law ... We have conscientiously documented the exploitation of the workers. The method of understanding exploitation is based on the method of analysis given in Marx’s *Das Kapital* ... We were astonished to find that the ‘peoples public servants’ have devoured all surplus value created by the people’s blood and sweat. The total value of this exploitation comes to an amount unmatched in history! Such ruthlessness and replete with ‘Chinese characteristics.’” [7]

The document called for an investigation into the “material consumption and use of palatial retreats” by, among others, Deng Xiaoping, Zhao Ziyang, Li Peng, Chen Yun, Wan Li and Jiang Zemin—and their family members. “Their assets should be immediately frozen and subjected to the scrutiny of a National People’s Investigative Committee,” it stated.

“The people have acquired political consciousness,” it concluded. “They have recognised that there are only two classes: the rulers and the ruled ... and that the political movements of the last 40 years have served simply as a political means of oppressing the people.”

As a byproduct of the Beijing events, Workers Autonomous Federations formed in major cities around China, including Changsha, Shaoyang, Xiangtan, Hengyang and Yueyang.

Martial law

Within the bureaucracy the mass entry of the working class into struggle ended the debate over whether or not to use force. On the evening of May 20, Premier Li Peng declared martial law and Zhao Ziyang was placed under house arrest. One hundred thousand soldiers from the Beijing Military Region were ordered into the city.

The working class met martial law with mass action. Over a million citizens of Beijing assembled in the city centre on May 21 to protect the hunger strike, and again on the following days.

Summoned by the Workers Federation, the student groups and other independent bodies, workers barricaded the streets of Beijing leading to the square. Youth on motorbikes were formed into early warning sentries. Mobile “dare-to-die” squads were established to move quickly to problem areas. When troops entered the outskirts of the city on May 23, thousands of workers and students marched out to meet the troops and explain what was happening in the city.

According to one account of the day: “The martial law that Li Peng and his gang has issued has thus far been rendered as useless as a blank sheet of paper. The soldiers are being persuaded by excited people and students; some of the persuaders are choking with sobs, while some soldiers shed tears in return. Quite a number of soldiers have driven their trucks away.” By May 24 the Beijing military units had been completely withdrawn from the city. The government feared they would join the workers. Mass demonstrations were taking place across China in support of Beijing.

Within Beijing itself all visible government authority had disappeared. Students and workers took over directing traffic, co-ordinating essential services and protecting property from criminal elements—though even the Beijing pickpockets declared a sympathy strike with the students. Production virtually halted as workers stayed away from work to take part in mass rallies.

On May 25 the Workers Federation and student groups organised a political demonstration of close to one million workers. The insurrectionary tone of the slogans and sentiments of the workers’ organisation had become more clearly expressed. A statement issued on May 26 read:

“Our nation was created from the struggle and labour of we workers and all other mental and manual labourers. We are the rightful masters of this nation. We must be heard in national affairs. We absolutely must not allow this small band of degenerate scum of the nation and the working class to usurp our name and suppress the students, murder democracy and trample human rights.”

Another statement declared:

“The final struggle has arrived ... We have seen that the fascist governments and Stalinist dictatorships spurned by hundreds of millions of people have not, and indeed will not, voluntarily withdraw from the historical stage ... Storm this 20th century Bastille, this last stronghold of Stalinism!” [8]

By this time the student movement was wracked by infighting over how long to continue the occupation of Tiananmen. Many Beijing students had returned to their campuses after the declaration of martial law and their organisation proposed withdrawing from the square, a decision initially supported by Chai Ling and only overturned by the intervention of student bodies from outside the capital.

With each passing day, more and more of China was being drawn into political struggles. The almost accidental leaders of the students were overwhelmed by the scope of what was unfolding. However courageous, these were not people who had prepared politically, or psychologically, to lead a revolution.

There is no question that the actions of students like Chai Ling and Wang Dan in launching the hunger strike on May 13 were a critical factor

in subsequent events. Yet their political perspective was based on hopes that a compromise would be forthcoming from the Stalinist state. Instead, a bloody confrontation loomed.

Sharp tensions came to dominate relations between the Workers Federation and the student organisations in Tiananmen Square. The students correctly sensed that the dominance the working class and its social demands now exerted in the political movement made discussions with the regime impossible, yet they were unwilling to support the limited measures the Federation suggested to extend the anti-government movement. On May 28, as the army closed in on the city, the student bodies rejected a proposal by the Workers Federation for a national general strike call.

Instead the central demand advanced by the student movement was that an emergency National People's Congress be held to discuss the student demands for political reforms. This was a body comprised entirely of top party bureaucrats, whose material interests were bound up with the ongoing suppression of the Chinese masses.

Crisis of political perspective

For two weeks Beijing was in the hands of its citizens. The regime, however, did not sit on its hands. With the concessions of Zhao Ziyang failing to rein in the students, Deng Xiaoping used the time to reassemble the nerve and unity of the Stalinist state for a bloodbath against the Beijing workers. Some 280,000 troops of the 27th Army, a unit based in peasant provinces and totally loyal to Deng, moved to the capital, arriving on June 1.

Inexperienced politically and lacking a political perspective outside of opposition to the existing regime, the workers' leaders advanced no alternative to, and deferred to, the student bodies. The workers of China knew in their life experience what they were against—Stalinism and capitalism—but they were not able to articulate any perspective for an alternative social order.

Decades of domination by Stalinism and the active suppression of genuine Marxism in China meant there was no revolutionary socialist, that is, Trotskyist, tendency in the working class. No organisation within the country could spontaneously advance the program that was implicit in the actions and sentiments of the Chinese working class—a political revolution to overthrow the Stalinist regime and introduce major reforms into the economy for the benefit of the working class.

Posed before the working class was the necessity to take political power through the establishment of a workers' government and to extend its authority and influence throughout the country. A statement issued by the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, on June 8 elaborated this perspective:

“The Chinese Stalinist bureaucracy has already proceeded far down the road of capitalist restoration and therefore the political revolution in China today will have major social implications, first and foremost the necessity for the working class and its revolutionary party is to expropriate the class of capitalists sponsored by the bureaucracy, together with the foreign multinationals ...

“What remains of China's planned economy must be reorganised from top to bottom ... Production must be placed under the control of factory committees, freely elected by the workers, and the quality and pricing of commodities should be put in the hands of a democratically organised consumers' cooperative.

“Such a political revolution ... would create the greatest shock waves of social revolution throughout Asia and internationally. Breaking the Stalinist straight-jacket of 'socialism in one country' and linking up its

forces to those of the workers of Asia and internationally in the common struggle to put an end to imperialism, the Chinese workers would create the real foundations for developing socialism in China as part of the development of world socialism.” [9]

The aftermath of Tiananmen Square

While defiant to the end, without an independent perspective it was only a question of time before the politically and physically disarmed workers of Beijing would confront the full brunt of state reaction.

The first tanks that entered Tiananmen Square on the morning of June 4 targeted and crushed the tent headquarters of the Workers Autonomous Federation, killing the 20 or more leaders still coordinating resistance to the military.

The military subjugation of the capital was the signal for a reign of terror throughout China. Spontaneous demonstrations that erupted across the country, as the news of Beijing spread, were dealt with in brutal fashion, with hundreds more workers and students killed.

Some 40,000 people were arrested in June and July alone, the majority being members or contacts of the Workers Federations. Dozens of workers were sentenced to death and executed, in some cases by public firing squads. Hundreds of workers remain in detention today. The repression extended to the deepest levels of Chinese society with all citizens of Beijing required to participate in “self-criticisms,” recounting their “mistakes” during April and May.

The majority of students were treated somewhat differently. The hunger strikers and several thousand students who had remained at the monument to the Heroes of the Revolution as the troops stormed through Beijing were negotiated with and permitted to return to their campuses physically unscathed. The majority of the student leaders were then smuggled into exile. Those students who were arrested were generally given relatively light sentences. Beijing University enrolments were cut for several years but then returned to normal.

The class content of the Tiananmen Square massacre is most graphically demonstrated however by the response of the western politicians, media and corporations. The wave of condemnation and revulsion expressed in June and July of 1989 soon gave way to the far more practical considerations of profit.

Once it was clear the Stalinist regime had stabilised the political situation, the demonstration that it would pursue its market reforms by utilising the most repressive measures against the working class was positively welcomed in the émigré Chinese business community and the major corporate boardrooms around the globe. Tiananmen Square was like a global advertisement for investment—in China, no opposition to exploitation and oppression is tolerated.

From 1990 on, investment flowed into China at exponential levels. In 1994 more investment entered the country than in the entire decade from 1979-1989.

The most literal example of the crocodile tears shed for the victims of Tiananmen came from the then Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke. He burst into tears on national television in 1989 at the scenes in Beijing. His departure from politics several years later saw him emerge as a leading consultant for corporate investment into China, fully exploiting his intimate personal ties to leading Stalinist officials.

With the working class subdued and a generation of young leaders killed, imprisoned or in exile, the regime has been able to accelerate the restoration of the capitalist market, relatively free of mass political opposition. The 1990s have seen the virtual completion of the processes initiated in 1979. The bulk of state-owned firms will have been

restructured as private concerns or closed down by the end of next year (2000). Processes well underway will soon see the majority of economic activity opened to foreign competition and ownership. The 1999 National People's Congress elevated private property to equivalent status with state-owned industry. It was the final constitutional act of restoring the primacy of capitalist social relations and ending the fiction that China is some form of communist society.

A new upsurge of the Chinese working class against the new bourgeoisie is however inevitable and there are numerous social indicators that it is brewing. In this struggle workers will have to confront the same essential political issue that emerged in 1989—the necessity for an independent political perspective from that of the petty-bourgeois democrats. Courage and determination are not enough. A revolutionary socialist party must be built in the Chinese working class. Its basis is to be found in the heritage of Leon Trotsky and the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Notes:

[1] *Beijing's Unforgettable Spring*, Liu Binyan and Xu Gang, describing events at the Xidan intersection, 2 km west of Tiananmen Square, pp. 59–60

[2] *Beijing Diary*, by Lu Yuan, p. 16

[3] Amnesty International Report, August 30, 1989

[4] *The Deng Xiaoping Era: an inquiry into the fate of Chinese socialism 1978-1994*, by Maurice Meisner, p. 315

[5] *Chen Village: The recent history of a peasant community in Mao's China*, Anita Chan, Richard Madsen and Jonathon Unger, cited in *The Deng Xiaoping Era*, p. 316

[6] *China's Crisis*, Liu Binyan, p. 79

[7] *The Deng Xiaoping Era: an inquiry into the fate of Chinese socialism 1978-1994*, by Maurice Meisner, p. 446

[8] Cited in *Workers in the Tiananmen protests: The politics of the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation*, by Andrew G. Walder and Gong Xiaoxia, first published in the *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No 29, Jan 1993

[9] "Victory to the Political Revolution in China!" Statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International, published in the *Fourth International* magazine, Vol 16 No 1–2, June 1989, p. 8



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