

General election in Taiwan marked by anti-China atmosphere

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Taiwan's presidential and legislative elections are set to take place today, January 11, with President Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) predicted to win. Tsai and the DPP have used her campaign to fuel a growing anti-China atmosphere.

The last poll released on December 31 indicated that Tsai held a 16-point lead over the main challenger, Kaohsiung mayor Han Kuo-yu of the Kuomintang (KMT). James Soong, of the People First Party, was a distant third. Some 19 percent of voters indicated they were still undecided.

The DPP currently controls the legislature, known as the Legislative Yuan, with 68 out of 113 seats. The KMT controls 35. There is no guarantee the DPP will hold on to its majority after Saturday, though it is likely to remain the largest party. A number of candidates from the new Taiwan People's Party, as well as independents, are hoping to capitalize on public discontent with both the ruling and main opposition parties. The Taiwan People's Party was established by Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je and has been supported by the billionaire head of Foxconn, Terry Gou.

None of the capitalist parties in Taiwan have a progressive program for the working class or youth. Instead, they are waging a struggle as the representative of different sections of the big business, with the DPP speaking for the faction that seeks to enrich itself through closer ties with US and Japanese imperialism, and the KMT representing those that have strived to increase relations with the capitalist oligarchy in mainland China. Tsai and the DPP attempted to paint the conflict as a battle against Chinese threats to "sovereignty" and "democracy" as a means of concealing the essential class issues.

At present, cross-strait relations are governed by the 1992 Consensus, in which both Beijing and Taipei

agree that there is only one China, of which Taiwan is part. While the United States recognized Beijing's People's Republic of China in 1979 and ended formal recognition of the government in Taipei, Washington has maintained close ties with Taiwan and provided it with a security guarantee.

The Trump administration has sought to expand the already close relations with Taiwan. It has encouraged more extensive official exchanges and providing it with massive amounts of military hardware in preparation for a war with China, in which the island would be on the frontlines.

The threat of war is constant, as Washington continually pushes against China's red line on Taiwan. Beijing has always maintained that it will use force to unite the island with the mainland, should Taipei ever violate the One China consensus and declare itself an independent state. While the DPP cautiously leans towards independence, Washington's support, with the goal of backing Beijing into a corner, could encourage the DPP to make such a pronouncement.

Washington's war plans and the ramping up of tensions with China are being kept from the Taiwanese people. Instead, the government is using claims of Chinese interference to prepare for conflict and for putting down domestic opposition from youth and workers.

During her New Year's speech last week, Tsai stated: "Over the past few years, China's diplomatic offensives, military coercion, interference, and infiltration have continued unabated. China's objective is clear, to force Taiwan to compromise our sovereignty."

Tsai and the DPP have pointed to China's political influence in Hong Kong as an example of what would happen should Taiwan ever accept a similar "one

country, two system” arrangement.

However, at the heart of the protests in Hong Kong is deep dissatisfaction with social inequality, in addition to attacks on democratic rights. The conditions in Hong Kong are the result of capitalist rule, first under Great Britain and now China. The entire ruling layer in Hong Kong, including the pan-democrats, has benefited as a result.

The situation is no different in Taiwan. Both the DPP and KMT have overseen years of declining living standards for the working class and a widening gulf between the rich and poor. The KMT when it held power claimed closer relations with the mainland would result in improved economic conditions for workers. When these improvements failed to materialize, voters turned to the DPP, but social inequality has continued to worsen.

Nearly 12 percent of youth between 15 and 24 cannot find work, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Wages have been suppressed in order to allow Taiwanese companies to compete with overseas competitors. Taiwan’s minimum wage is only around 2.6 times higher than it was 30 years ago, representing a massive fall in real living standards when inflation is taken into account. It will rise 3 percent next year, or \$NT700 (\$US24), to just \$NT23,800 (\$US794) a month.

Faced with growing discontent, the Legislative Yuan passed an “anti-interference” law on December 31. It heightens penalties for those accused of acting on behalf of China to influence Taiwanese politics. This includes up to five years in jail and fines up to \$NT10 million. The new law focuses on political donations, lobbying, disrupting elections, aiding elections, or disrupting social order.

The new law could easily be deployed against workers and youth protesting war and inequality. As millions of oppressed around the globe increasingly move into conflict with their ruling classes, they are realizing that their struggles are shared by people around the world. Taiwanese workers organizing joint action with their mainland Chinese counterparts could be arrested under the new legislation. The government could also use it to criminalize and silence political critics by claiming they are Beijing’s pawns.

Taipei’s move towards restricting democratic rights has been cheered on by the US establishment and social

media conglomerates. The *New York Times* wrote on January 6 that “officials and researchers worry that China is experimenting with social media manipulation to sway the vote [in Taiwan]. Doing so would be easy, they fear, in the island’s rowdy democracy, where the news cycle is fast and voters are already awash in false or highly partisan information.”

Facebook, Google, and messaging app Line all agreed to crack down on supposed disinformation months ahead of the vote. The *Times* is calling for further repressive measures online, not only in Taiwan, but in the United States, where the newspaper is conducting an anti-China campaign along the same lines as the one directed against Russia.



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