

Beijing reacts to mounting US belligerence with nationalist boycott campaign

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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime has responded to Washington's sanctions and escalating threats by whipping up a foul nationalist campaign at home and the boycott of foreign companies involved in the bogus "human rights" campaign to stop buying cotton from China's western province of Xinjiang.

The Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) involving European and American clothing manufacturers has emerged as the Biden administration is ramping up the false claim that the Chinese government is engaged in the genocide of the minority Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang and horror stories of mass detentions, forced sterilisations and the placement of children in state institutions.

While the CCP is undoubtedly using police-state measures to suppress opposition in Xinjiang, as is the case throughout China, the US denunciations have nothing to do with defending democratic rights but are a central feature of the demonisation of Beijing as Washington prepares for war.

The Chinese regime has reacted by deliberately encouraging anti-foreign hysteria and has given all but formal support to a boycott of foreign clothing manufacturers.

The Communist Youth League (CYL) was one of the main instigators with a statement on March 24 on its Weibo account targeting the Swedish fashion brand H&M. The CYL declared that H&M, which supported the BCI campaign against Xinjiang cotton last September, "has not cooperated with any garment factory in Xinjiang, nor has its sourced products or raw materials from this region."

The CYL attacked the Swedish company for "deliberately making trouble for Xinjiang cotton" and "spreading rumours," and encouraged the public to boycott H&M. Within hours, a storm of nationalist protest on social media hit out at international brands such as H&M, Nike and Uniqlo. Nearly a hundred major

international brands, most of which have partnerships with BCI, were identified and condemned.

At the same time, China's state media also began to publish incitements to nationalist anger, with netizens spreading the content across the Chinese internet. A large number of videos were circulated on the internet showing that within a few days, the stores of the targeted brands in many regions were closed. Well-known online shopping platforms such as Taobao have also blocked related brands and products.

Some groups held rallies in front of the malls. The very fact that these protests proceeded and were ignored by police indicates high-level official support for the campaign.

On March 31, H&M issued a statement which declared that the company's long-term commitment to the Chinese market remained firm and it hoped to "serve and act in a respectful manner." However, the *People's Daily*, the CCP's chief media organ, replied on its Weibo account that "the Chinese people do not buy it" and that "national interests are above all else."

Comments by Chinese officials became increasingly strident. On March 25, foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying defended the boycott of foreign brands declaring it was "simple patriotism," adding that "anyone with integrity will not tolerate damage to the interests and dignity of their motherland by people with ulterior motives."

At a press conference on March 29, a spokesperson for the Xinjiang government declared that "China is no longer in 1840"—a reference to the imperialist subjugation of China by the European powers in the 19th Century. The current CCP regime, however, is not opposed to imperialism as such, but rather has ambitions to have a place in the international imperialist order.

The anti-foreign campaign erupted just days after top US officials—Secretary of State Antony Blinken and

National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan—deliberately provoked an angry public exchange at the start of their meeting in Alaska with their Chinese counterparts, with a long list of condemnations of Beijing including over “human rights” in Xinjiang.

The US propaganda broadside clearly demonstrated that the Biden administration, far from toning down Trump’s vitriolic anti-China attacks, is going to step them up, along with its punitive economic measures and military build-up against China throughout Asia. The coronavirus pandemic, by further exposing the historic decline of the US, has accelerated Washington’s determination to use all available means including war, if necessary, to prevent Beijing from eroding US global dominance.

While it claims that the anti-foreign campaign is the spontaneous expression of the patriotic sentiments of the Chinese people, Beijing has been careful to keep the protests within its confines. It fears that any movement, no matter how limited, could become the focus of the country’s extreme social tensions and trigger broader oppositional protests by working people that could threaten the regime.

The last major boycott campaign took place in 2012 in opposition to the Japanese government’s decision to “nationalise” the disputed rocky outcrops in the East China Sea known in Japan as the Senkakus and as the Diaoyu Islands in China that were previously privately owned. Protests involving hundreds of thousands erupted in many parts of China calling for a boycott of Japanese goods, which led to violent attacks on Japanese shops and businesses, Japanese citizens and even Chinese people carrying Japanese goods.

Beijing shut down the demonstrations when they began threatening the CCP itself. In Shenzhen, paramilitary police were mobilised and used water cannons and tear gas against thousands of protesters who tried to storm the local CCP headquarters.

There is nothing progressive about the current nationalist campaign in China, which the CCP is using to advance its interests internationally, while driving a wedge between Chinese workers and their class brothers and sisters around the world.

Beijing is seeking to exploit the boycotts to counter intense US pressure and also to try to open up divisions between Washington and its European allies. In the immediate lead-up to the US-China confrontation in Alaska, the European Union joined the US, Great Britain and Canada in imposing sanctions on top Chinese officials in Xinjiang.

China has imposed reciprocal sanctions on the European Union which threaten to undermine the in-principal investment agreement reached between Beijing and the EU last December. The deal reportedly contains the “most ambitious outcomes” that China had ever agreed to in terms of market access with far wider access for European investors to China and broader opportunities for Chinese investment to some manufacturing and energy sectors within the EU. The deal has been opposed in the US by both the Trump and Biden administrations.

At the same time, the CCP regime is stirring up the nationalist campaign against foreign companies in a bid to divert social anger and hostility in a reactionary direction. The anti-foreigner xenophobia finds support particularly among middle-class youth who regard their future as bound up with the continued expansion of Chinese capitalism and are hostile to attempts of the US and its allies to block that.

The CCP, which nakedly defends the interest of the country’s super-rich oligarchs, is incapable of making any appeal to the working class on the basis of socialism and is increasingly relying on nationalism to suppress dissent. Egged on by the government, extreme nationalists, online and offline, attack people who are “disloyal to the government,” and use the boycott to “support national interests.”

The prospect of a war between the world’s largest and second-largest economies both armed with nuclear weapons is looming ever larger. The allies of the working class in China are not the regime in Beijing, which is responsible for capitalist restoration and the growth of immense social inequality, but the working class in the US, Europe and internationally.

The rejection of all forms of nationalism and chauvinism is the first step in building a united international movement of workers based on socialist principles to put an end to capitalism and its outmoded division of the world into rival nation states that is the root cause of war.



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