

Origins and consequences of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre

Part 2

By John Chan
5 June 2009

The following is the second part of a three-part series. Click here for part 1 and part 3.

Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Deng Xiaoping, was not initially hostile to the student protests that erupted in mid-April. Zhao Ziyang, the CCP secretary, went so far as to endorse the demonstrations as “patriotic”, which encouraged workers to begin to agitate for their own demands.

In Shaanxi, for instance, 10,000 people, including many workers, gathered daily in front of the provincial Communist Party office to discuss not only the death of Hu Yaobang, but social issues such as inflation, wages and housing. Such was the impact of the protests that by April 25, the State Security Ministry had issued a warning that students from all over China were sending delegates to Beijing to form a national organisation and commemorate the May Fourth Movement. New slogans of “No victory can be achieved without the support of the working class” from among the more radical students saw a shift of the movement to the left.

On April 20, the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation (WAF) was established by a small group of workers, and it emerged as the organising centre of the workers’ movement by mid-May. Two days later, 100,000 people assembled in Tiananmen Square and one million took to the streets for Hu’s funeral—most of them workers. On that day, the federation distributed leaflets, condemning the wealth of Deng Xiaoping’s family, the privileges of the bureaucracy and the “shortcomings” of market reform. The WAF also demanded the stabilisation of prices and to make public the wealth of the top Chinese leaders.

The CCP leadership was divided—and the major cause was the intervention of the working class. Zhao was reluctant to use force to suppress the students and called for dialogue, while Premier Li Peng, who headed the hard-line wing, rejected any compromise or peaceful solution. Taking advantage of Zhao’s visit to North Korea on April 23, Li took the initiative, reporting to Deng that nationwide unrest was being organised. The paramount leader gave his support for a tough response.

The result was a *People’s Daily* editorial on April 26 denouncing the protests as “anti-Party, anti-socialist turmoil” and a “planned conspiracy” to overthrow the CCP. Outraged by the labelling of demands for social equality and democratic rights as “anti-socialist”, more students and workers joined the protests. Right across China, huge demonstrations erupted, reflecting long pent-up anger over the CCP’s betrayal of its promise that the 1949 revolution would bring about an equal and democratic society.

On April 30, Zhao returned to China and attempted to calm the students by trying to tone down the April 26 editorial. However, it was already widely known that Deng was behind the editorial and Zhao had little room to move. In order to reach an agreement with the students, Zhao

promised to fight corruption and make token democratic reforms. He viewed the student movement as a vehicle for advancing his economic and political agenda, against that section of the CCP bureaucracy that opposed the market from the standpoint of preserving its privileged positions in the old state apparatus and industries.

Zhao also saw the students as a buffer against the working class. He recalled: “During the demonstrations, students raised many slogans and demands, but the problem of inflation was conspicuously missing, though inflation was a hot topic that could easily have resonated with and ignited all of society... In hindsight, it’s obvious that the reason the students did not raise the issue of inflation was that they knew that this issue was related to the reform program, and if pointedly raised to mobilise the masses, it could have turned out to obstruct the reform process.” [6]

Zhao’s support for the student protests, however, only emboldened the working class. While sections of elite Beijing university students withdrew from the demonstrations, students from other cities, as well as high school students and teachers, began to play a more prominent role in the protests. On the anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, a quarter of a million Beijing workers joined the 60,000 students who marched in Tiananmen Square. Similar protests occurred in 51 Chinese cities.

On May 13, a more radical current emerged among the students, calling for a hunger strike to pressure the regime to make concessions, especially to recognise the Students Autonomous Federation as a legal organisation. The regime could not comply, because to do so would have quickly led to demands by workers for recognition of the Workers Autonomous Federation.

The hunger strike, which drew in thousands of students, was planned just before the visit of President Gorbachev to Beijing, drawing world attention to the protests and dramatically increasing the political crisis of the CCP. The hunger strike and occupation of Tiananmen Square quickly became the focus of mass protests by workers, providing an arena for the WAF to publicly declare its existence, conduct agitation, coordinate visits to factories and recruit new members. Both Li Peng and Zhao Ziyang rushed to “dialogue” with workers’ representatives, particularly of the 200,000 workers at Capital Iron and Steel, but were unable to curb the radicalisation taking place within the working class.

On May 15, half a million workers and students rallied in Tiananmen Square, despite Zhao’s public pleas not to obstruct the historic Sino-Soviet summit. On May 17, two million people marched in Beijing, many under the banners of their workplace. Thousands of workers joined the WAF, not only in Beijing but in other Chinese cities. Eighteen provinces reported large-scale protests. On May 18, in the provincial capital of Hebei, 150,000 people took to the streets. In Shanghai, 100,000 workers, teachers, government officials, students and scientists turned out.

Unlike the liberal intelligentsia, the workers expressed hostility to the regime as whole. “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 methods of analysis given in Marx’s *Das Capital*... We were astonished to find that the ‘peoples public servants’ have devoured all surplus value created by the people’s blood and sweat”, declared one of the WAF’s leaflets. [7]

The document called for an investigation into the corruption of the entire CCP leadership, including Zhao Ziyang, and the freezing of their personal assets under a national peoples’ committee.

Martial law

On May 17, the threat of a working class rebellion saw a decisive shift within the CCP leadership away from Zhao’s policy of compromise with the students to military repression. In a report to Deng Xiaoping, Zhao advised: “If we take a confrontational stance with the masses, a dangerous situation could ensue in which we lose complete control.” [8] However, Deng backed the hard-line majority, blaming Zhao for supporting the “political turmoil”.

“We’ve all seen how the situation in Beijing and across the country has become most grave... We first have to settle the instability in Beijing, because if we don’t we’ll never be able to settle it in other provinces, regions, and cities... If things continued like this, we could even end up under house arrest. After thinking long and hard about this, I’ve concluded that we should bring in the People’s Liberation Army and declare martial law in Beijing—more precisely, in Beijing’s urban district. The aim of martial law will be to suppress turmoil once and for all and to return things quickly to normal,” Deng declared. [9]

Zhao refused to order the army against the students and decided to resign as party general secretary. He was barred from doing so, however, to avoid compounding the political crisis, but was effectively pushed aside. Knowing that his political career was finished, Zhao visited the students in Tiananmen Square, urging them to leave before the military arrived. He was placed under house arrest, where he remained until his death in 2005. Zhao’s successor was the Shanghai CCP party secretary, Jiang Zemin, who had firmly backed a crackdown against the protestors from the outset.

On May 20, Premier Li Peng declared martial law in Beijing, provoking a protest by one million people the following day. To counter the troops, workers and youth set up street barricades, while motorcyclists formed early warning teams. When the army arrived on May 23, thousands of workers and students tried to persuade the soldiers not to turn their weapons against the people. Many of the troops were moved to tears and even drove their trucks away. The next day, the army divisions from the Beijing region were ordered to pull out, to prevent the soldiers from joining the workers. Deng decided to transport troops from the remote provinces to implement martial law, allowing the protests to continue for two more weeks.

One study explained: “The declaration of martial law shortly after midnight on the evening of 19 May radically altered the pattern of political activity in the city. Beginning with the successful blockade of army units by unarmed citizens throughout the city in the early morning hours of 20 May and afterward, mass resistance to the government was suddenly a reality. By daylight on the 20th, *gongzilian* [WAF] reiterated its call for a general strike (excluding essential services, communications and transportation), to stay in force until the troops withdrew. The militant positions that the workers’ organisation had articulated, and the organisation it had developed on the square in the preceding week, thrust

it into the middle of unfolding events on the streets. Meanwhile, popular outrage over martial law drove many new recruits into the freshly declared workers’ organisation, swelling its ranks.” [10]

From May 21-22, protests, many numbering in the hundreds of thousands, expanded to 131 cities across China, even involving layers of low-ranking CCP members, to support the actions of the Beijing workers. On the eve of June 3, WAF’s membership had swelled to 20,000. It had 150 full-time activists, had adopted a constitution, elected a leading committee and created a team of guards to protect the hunger strikers. It was operating a printing facility and a public broadcaster that drew massive crowds of workers to hear political speeches each evening.

With the authorities in Beijing paralysed, workers started to take matters into their own hands in simple matters such as directing traffic. Production ground to a halt as workers participated in the demonstrations. On May 25, one million people held another massive protest in Beijing. A WAF statement issued the next day declared: “We [the working class] 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 [the Stalinist leadership] 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, indeed will not, voluntarily withdraw from the historical stage... Storm this 20th century Bastille, this last stronghold of Stalinism!” [11]

The crisis of revolutionary perspective

Although the crisis had posed the question of the working class taking power, the issue was how and on the basis of what program. For decades, the CCP had used its monopoly over the media and educational institutions to promote the lie that Stalinism equalled Marxism, socialism and communism. The only political movement that offered a scientific analysis of Stalinism and the political means for workers to fight it—the Fourth International—had been ruthlessly suppressed in the 1950s. The Chinese Trotskyists had been murdered, jailed or forced into exile.

Chinese workers had no access to the works of Trotsky, or indeed anything about the history and struggles of the international working class, other than the Chinese regime’s own vulgar justifications for the crimes and betrayals of Stalinism. They knew nothing of the political struggles of the Left Opposition led by Trotsky from 1923 against the emerging Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and its betrayals of the international working class. Trotsky’s penetrating analysis of Stalin’s betrayal of the Chinese revolution in 1925-27 was, of course, banned, as were the far-reaching conclusions that he drew in 1933 following the Soviet bureaucracy’s criminal role in enabling Hitler to come to power unopposed. His decision to found the Fourth International and his call for a political revolution by the Soviet working class against the Stalinist bureaucracy had a burning relevance to Chinese workers in 1989. Needless to say, the entire history of the international Trotskyist movement in the post-war period, and its struggles against petty bourgeois opportunism and nationalism, remained a closed book.

In May-June 1989, Chinese workers were driven by their own immediate experiences and their hatred for the Maoist regime. Their demands instinctively reflected their own independent class interests and went far further than those of the students. But, as the course of events was to tragically confirm, it was impossible for the working class to improvise a revolutionary leadership and program in the heat of the moment.

The protest movement was thus left in the hands of the student leaders, whose views were largely dominated by naïve illusions that a dialogue with the regime about the granting of reforms was possible. The

inexperienced WAF leaders were guided by the syndicalist conception that independent unions should be formed to negotiate better wages and conditions with the bureaucracy and the emerging capitalists, not that the working class had to take power in China, as part of the struggles of the international working class for world socialism.

The WAF's key leader, Han Dongfang, was a 26-year-old railway worker, who became known as "China's Walesa", after the leader of the Polish Solidarity movement. He gathered his political ideas in the course of walking among the protestors in Tiananmen Square. After listening to speeches by the students on "freedom of association", he and other workers decided to formally establish the WAF as an independent union.

At a meeting with students on May 26, Han expressed a certain limited class critique of the student movement, but nevertheless accepted its continued political leadership. "You theoreticians can go on acting as the brains of the movement, and students can give it its emotional spark. But unless workers are the main force, the struggle for democracy will never succeed... I hear you talking about 'citizens', who are out on the streets, when what I think you mean is 'workers'. I don't know if there is a deliberate evasion on your part, but it's important to call these people by their true name". [12]

The WAF was unable to make an appeal to the PLA troops, which would have required linking the struggle of urban workers with the multi-millioned rural poor. The soldiers were certainly far from solidly behind the Maoist regime. Even those troops brought by Deng from outside Beijing had to be banned from reading the news for more than a week before they were suddenly sent to suppress the protests. On June 3-4, many troops, especially those of the 28th Army, still disobeyed orders to shoot the protestors and threw away their guns. At a leadership meeting on June 2, Deng expressed the fear that the army could split and a civil war break out. The workers' movement, however, was politically unprepared to win the soldiers to its side.

During the June 4 crackdown, Han escaped with the aid of a dozen young men who risked their lives to save the man they viewed as the leader of China's workers. One of them said: "We don't know how many people will die tonight. Blood will flow like a river. But you cannot die—you will be China's Lech Walesa." But Han was not politically equipped to lead the working class against the regime. He told Reuters in 2004: "What that young man said to me is like a rock pressing against my heart. I can't even breathe whenever I think of it today. I was an electrician who got into a movement with a muddled head. Then there were the bullets and I heard those words. It was a very strange moment."

Revolutionary crises often push previously little known individuals to the forefront of the class struggle, placing before them decisions that will decide the course of history. The Russian working class, with the backing of the peasantry, was able to take power in the 1917 October Revolution because it had a long-established *professional* revolutionary party headed by Lenin, a party that had waged a determined struggle over decades against all forms of opportunism in the labour movement, not only in Russia but internationally. Indeed, the collapse of the WAF and the subsequent evolution of leaders like Han vindicated Lenin's conclusion that spontaneously the working class was unable to rise above trade union consciousness—i.e., the struggle for better wages and conditions within the existing social order.

Since 1994, Han has become a semi-official adviser on labour reform through his *China Labour Bulletin* and his radio talk shows based in Hong Kong. His activities are financed by the Western trade union bureaucracy, whose aim is to prevent workers from challenging the interests of foreign investors in China. In 2004, Han told the Hong Kong business newspaper, the *Standard*, that he never wanted to lead a workers' revolt in China. "I have been working hard to prevent it from happening... but I do despair at times."

Han's perspective is to pressure the CCP for social reforms through

legal action by workers, rather than protests on the street. He advocates the establishment of state-controlled unions for workers to carry out "collective bargaining" with employers, in the hope that such mechanisms will reduce social unrest. Now opposed to the class struggle, Han has converted to Christianity. "All my life has been pre-arranged by God ... God has the plans" for Chinese workers, he told the *Standard*.

To be continued

Notes:

6. *Prisoner of the State*, p.34

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

8. *Prisoner of the State*, p.28

9. *The Tiananmen Papers*, p.189

10. 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

11. *Ibid*

12. *From comrade to citizen: the struggle for political rights in China*, Merle Goldman, Harvard University Press, 2005, p.64

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