

China jails leading dissident

By John Chan
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The Chinese regime sentenced Liu Xiaobao, a well-known advocate of democratic reform, to 11 years in prison on December 25. Liu was found guilty of “inciting subversion of state power” by initiating an online “Charter 08” campaign that attracted 10,000 signatories.

The online campaign, led by Liu and other prominent middle class figures associated with the student movement in 1989, urged modifications to the authoritarian rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The harsh prison term is a sign that Beijing is stepping up political repression amid signs of growing social instability. Liu has already been detained for nearly 12 months.

The 53-year-old Liu, a former university professor, was one of the leaders of the 1989 student protests that called for limited democratic reforms. The student movement opened the floodgates for the intervention of workers who raised far more radical social demands. The CCP sent heavily armed troops to crush the Beijing workers on June 3-4 of that year.

Liu was arrested for his role in the Tiananmen Square protests, but unlike most worker activists, he was soon released. In effect, the regime tentatively tolerated the tendency around Liu, which was based on a conservative parliamentary perspective. Sections of the Stalinist bureaucracy itself had been pushing for limited democratic changes as the means of creating a social base among sections of the middle class to push through its pro-market reforms.

Liu continued to be part of the semi-underground “democracy movement” in the early 1990s, leading to three years of detention for “reform through labour” in 1996. After his release, he became a regular target for house arrest and close police surveillance during sensitive anniversaries such as the Tiananmen Square massacre. His sentencing to 11 years’ imprisonment represents a shift by the CCP toward harsher control

over dissidents.

Joshua Rosenzweig of the Dui Hua Foundation, a lobby group campaigning for Beijing to release political prisoners, told the *Financial Times* that the security clampdown in China had increased dramatically in recent years. He pointed to official data showing that arrests and convictions for “endangering state security” doubled in 2008 from 2007 and were nearly five times higher than in 2005.

The CCP’s concern is not primarily with figures like Liu. The lesson that the regime drew from the events of 1989 was that any protest movement—no matter how limited—can open the door for a far broader movement of the working class that threatens the very foundations of the state. While the Chinese economy continues to grow, the CCP leadership is acutely aware of its fragile nature amid the continuing global economic crisis that erupted in 2008.

Social tensions are already sharpening. Over the past two years, tens of millions of workers were laid off, especially from export industries, and millions of college graduates are still struggling to find jobs. In 2008, riots erupted in Tibet before being suppressed by armed police. In July 2009, the economic pressures fuelled ethnic unrest in the Xinjiang Uighur region, leading to riots that killed nearly 200 people. Isolated strikes and protests by workers and farmers are becoming more frequent.

The Chinese security apparatus is particularly concerned about the growing use of the Internet, by dissident political tendencies. Internet users in China have reached 338 million—the largest number in the world. A Chinese Academy of Social Sciences study in December found that of the 77 major “mass incidents” (protests, strikes and riots) in 2009, 30 percent were spread by the Internet and mobile phone.

Over the past year, Beijing has blocked social networking sites such as Twitter, YouTube and

Facebook, on the pretext of preventing pornography and scams. Last month, the authorities imposed tougher rules, restricting the ability of individuals to set up web sites and increasing scrutiny of company web sites.

Public security minister Meng Jianzhu expressed the regime's fear of social unrest in an essay, published last month in *Qiushi*, a party journal. Meng warned: "Social conflicts of all kinds are increasingly inter-meshed, complex and sensitive, presenting fresh challenges for the public security agencies." He claimed that the Internet had become a means for various hostile forces "to engage in infiltration and sabotage".

Meng urged the security forces to be ready to suppress any outburst of unrest. "As soon as a mass incident breaks out, we must ensure that it is quickly located, reported and brought under control." The number of "mass incidents" in China reached 120,000 in 2008, up from 90,000 in 2006 and 74,000 in 2004. According to some estimates, the figure for 2009 could be 230,000. The regime is particularly concerned to prevent the emergence of any organisation or party that might give a national focus to what at present are apparently isolated and spontaneous protests and strikes.

Liu's "Charter 08" explicitly seeks democratic reforms to head off a broader social movement. The campaign was launched in December 2008, at the height of the global financial meltdown. The charter warned that protests were "becoming more militant and raising the possibility of a violent conflict of disastrous proportions. The decline of the current system has reached the point where change is no longer optional."

Of the 19 demands of the Charter 08, one calls for the protection of private property—a demand to which the CCP regime has no objection in principle. However, other demands such as freedom of expression and freedom of assembly are unacceptable to the CCP. Another demand, for a loosely federated republic, could fuel ethnic and separatist discontent and undermine the CCP's ambition of building Chinese capitalism into a great power.

On December 23, diplomats from 15 foreign embassies, including the US, Canada and the EU, attempted to watch the court proceedings but were refused entry. An appeal read out by US embassy first secretary Greg May calling for the government to

release Liu and "respect rights of all Chinese citizens to peacefully express their political views" was rejected by Beijing as interference in its internal affairs.

Such criticisms by Western governments are hypocritical. Many of the largest global corporations based in the US and Europe are dependent on the super-exploitation of Chinese workers, which can be maintained only through police-state methods. In fact, under conditions of severe economic crisis, the world's major companies are even more reliant on the CCP to impose lower wages and worse conditions on workers.

If a movement such as Charter 08 were to pave the way for an eruption of workers, the same Western governments would quickly become concerned about the danger of "anarchy". While weeping crocodile tears over the killings in Tiananmen Square in 1989, global corporations recognised the massacre was a guarantee that Beijing would go to any lengths to suppress the working class and flooded the country with investment dollars.

Two decades later, the working class has grown massively in size. The jailing of Liu Xiaobao is above all another sign that the CCP regime is fearful of a repetition of the 1989 protests on a far broader scale and is preparing its police-state apparatus accordingly.

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