

The fear of “Nile fever” in China

By John Chan
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The scenes of mass protests of Egyptian workers and youth in Cairo demanding democratic rights and decent living standards have obviously been a chilling reminder to the Chinese regime of the events two decades ago in Tiananmen Square. Fearful that the revolutionary disease might spread from Egypt, Beijing has ordered its Internet police to filter out the word “Egypt” from microblogging sites to prevent active discussion among China’s millions of Internet users.

The Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* declared that the similarity of the current Egyptian unrest and the 1989 events in China was “too obvious to be ignored”. Explaining the sentiment in Chinese ruling circles, political scientist Liu Junning told the newspaper: “It is unbelievable to imagine that autocracies controlled by political strongmen can easily become unstable and be overthrown almost overnight.”

At first sight, China and Egypt appear to be poles apart—geographically, culturally and economically. But as *Financial Times* columnist Gideon Rachman noted, “there are some elements in the Egyptian uprising that might ring a few bells in Beijing: popular fury at corruption, the destabilising effect of rising food prices, youth unemployment, the ability of the Internet to mobilise popular protest, the gap between a ruling elite and the people they are trying to govern.”

Rachman sought to reassure his readers that “it is highly unlikely that the political contagion that has spread from Tunisia to Egypt will leap across continents to Asia.” But what Rachman identifies is precisely the deep social divide, class antagonisms and popular alienation from the political establishment that is characteristic of the situation in country after country around the world—including in China. The prospect of an Egyptian-style uprising in China, with its highly concentrated working class of 400 million, strikes terror in the hearts not only of the Chinese ruling elites but of the world’s financial aristocracy, which depends

so heavily on the Chinese cheap labour.

The *Wall Street Journal* was well aware that China was not “immune” to the contagion of “Nile fever”. It explained what it meant by citing a recent animation video made in China showing the masses, depicted as rabbits, rising up in anger over corruption and killing Communist Party bureaucrats. If inflation continued to worsen, the mouthpiece of Wall Street wrote, “history suggests China’s stability could prove to be a mirage.”

In many ways, the class tensions in China are just as acute as in Egypt. China boasts the world’s second largest group of billionaires—up by 69 to 189 in 2010—after the US, while its per capita GDP is only two-thirds that of Egypt. The gulf between rich and poor has been exacerbated by sharply rising prices for food and other basic necessities. Young people, including university graduates, are finding it increasingly difficult to obtain a job. Like the Egyptian youth, young Chinese workers form the bulk of the country’s 384 million Internet users, providing them with a global outlook and far greater social aspirations than previous generations.

The working class has always been an international class facing the same forms of class oppression. However, the global integration of the processes of production over the past three decades has drawn together workers around the world to an unprecedented extent. In many cases, Chinese and Egyptian workers are exploited by the same global corporations, as well as the similar oppressive regimes that serve the corporate elite. That is why the revolutionary upheavals in Egypt strike a chord among Chinese workers and youth—and terror into the ruling establishment.

The *Wall Street Journal*’s reference to “Nile fever” is reminiscent of the panicked fear of “Bolshevik infection” that struck the bourgeoisie around the world following the seizure of power by the Russian working class in October 1917 under the Bolshevik leadership

of Lenin and Trotsky. Just as workers now are beginning to draw inspiration from Egypt, the Russian revolution met an enthusiastic response among workers around the world, including in China.

The tragic defeat of the 1925-27 Chinese revolution holds great lessons for workers in Egypt and internationally. The Bolsheviks had led the Russian working class to power on the basis of Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which insists on the political independence of the proletariat from all sections of the perfidious national bourgeoisie. In China, Stalin subordinated the working class to the bourgeois Kuomintang, claiming it was leading the Chinese revolution. The result was the Kuomintang massacre of workers and peasants.

The events in China in June 1989 contain similar lessons. At the height of the upsurge, as workers joined protesting students in Tiananmen Square and other cities, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping appeared powerless. He feared the army would split, he would be placed under house arrest and the regime would collapse. But the protest movement lacked a revolutionary leadership. Rather than take the political initiative, the leaders of the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation tailed behind the petty bourgeois "democrats" of the student movement who promoted the fatal illusion that reformers in the Communist Party leadership would make "democratic" concessions. Deng used the breathing space to mobilise troops and tanks from the remote provinces to bloodily crush the protests.

Egyptian youth and workers should draw the necessary conclusions from these terrible defeats of the Chinese working class. The fight for basic democratic rights is intimately bound up with the struggle against capitalism. No faith should be put in the bourgeois opposition parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and leaders like Mohamed ElBaradei who, no less than the Mubarak dictatorship, defend the present social order. The working class must rely on its own independent strength and start to build its own organisations, above all a political party that will fight for a workers' government and socialist policies.

Chinese workers and youth, who took the first steps in the strike wave of last April and May, can draw inspiration from the determination and courage of their counterparts in Egypt. The struggles in China and

Egypt for democracy cannot be separated from the fight for international socialism. It is an urgent necessity for workers in Egypt, China and around the world to build sections of International Committee of Fourth International, which alone embodies all the strategic experiences of the working class of the past century. It is the only revolutionary tendency on the planet capable of leading the international working class to take power and establish a social order based on genuine social equality and democracy.

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