

# **A Harbinger Of Revolution That Went Astray**

**What Did The Democratic Movement Of 1989 Reveal IRPGF's Response To The  
28<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Of Tiananmen Square Incident**

International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces

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On April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1989, students of Beijing spontaneously gathered to mourn the recently deceased pro-reform Communist party leader Hu Yaobang, which led to the unfolding of the largest spontaneous mass resistance movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a matter of days, these gatherings of mourning students quickly evolved into a movement demanding political reform. By the mid of May, this student movement had further amplified into a nation wide mass movement. As students from across China poured into the capital city, protests and demonstrations broke out across the country, and large number of workers and citizens joined the ranks of the students. On May 20<sup>th</sup>, the government announced martial law, yet workers and Beijing residents blockaded roads in order to prevent the army from entering the city. On the evening of June 3<sup>rd</sup>, the army opened fire upon protesting masses, and entered Tiananmen Square forcibly. The news of violent suppression provoked large scale protests and demonstrations across the country. However severe nation wide suppression also resulted in thousands of workers, students and citizens sacrificing their lives as well as tens of thousands of arrests. This heroic movement ultimately ended in failure.

## A Harbinger Of Revolution

These two months of mass movement were misrepresented in two main ways. On one hand the movement was distorted as an anti-socialist, pro-”bourgeois liberalization”, counter-revolutionary riot by the Communist party;<sup>1</sup> on the other hand, it was characterized as a non-violent democratic movement by the mainstream liberal perspective. However whether it is the CPC’s slanderous propaganda against the movement or the mournful narrative as presented by the liberals, both perspectives conveniently concealed the revolutionary basis and potentials of this spontaneous mass movement. Through this article, we will re-examine history from a revolutionary perspective and discover what this particular historical moment reveals in relation to the ongoing struggle against authoritarianism, capitalism, patriarchy and all other forms of kyriarchy.

In 1979 Deng Xiaoping put forward the so called “reform and opening up” policy, which established the overall ruling principles of the Communist party — to gradually capitalize and marketize the economy, yet politically continue authoritarian governance in the name of socialism. After ten years of constructing this new national system, discontent among students and workers had grown and finally erupted into a movement. Students raised seven demands to the government,<sup>2</sup> with the first and foremost being that measures be taken against the wide spread corruption created by the reform. Facing employment problems exacerbated by economic restructuring and privatization of state enterprises, students also demanded improvement of the education system and better treatment of intellectuals. Regarding the mismanagement of economic reform and acceleration of wealth inequality, students demanded that government officials be held accountable and democratically elected. In addition, freedom of press guaranteed by the government was demanded, so the public would have the ability to supervise the government’s conduct. But compared to students and intellectuals, the critique of the working class against

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<sup>1</sup> Beijing Mayor Chen Xitong’s “Report on Checking the Turmoil and Quelling the Counterrevolutionary Rebellion”, June 30<sup>th</sup> 1989.

<sup>2</sup> “Seven-point Petition” submitted by students to the People’s Representatives, while demanded to be received by state leaders, April 18<sup>th</sup> 1989.

the new system was more radical and more aware. While the national economy developed with exceptional speed, inflation and the price of goods was raising rapidly, yet wages and benefits had been stagnating. In addition, public services like education and healthcare were being marketized, national properties privatized, and workers were being laid off en masse. In turn, workers lashed out against the government's claim that the reform was a success, as in reality it was exploitation against the working class by the ruling class.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as workers pointed out, the CPC ruling group had become thoroughly capitalist;<sup>4</sup> the party that used to hold aloft the slogan "workers are masters!" had long betrayed the working class.

Comparing today's China to 1989, not only have power struggles between cliques within the ruling class become more severe, but there is also rampant corruption within the bureaucracy and government. Wealth inequality has become extreme, society is in a turbulent state, hundreds of "right defending" protests, labor strikes and riots occur everyday. The new capitalist class that formulated around the CPC ruling group is now able to use the state apparatus and democratic centralism to safeguard their capital accumulation. There is a constant suppression of the civil society and the labor movement. The current CPC ruling clique with Xi Jinping at its core, initiated the so-called supply-side reform since 2015. The emphasis of this reform is essentially a further capitalization of the economy, to compensate the slowing down of economic growth through intensifying exploitation of the masses — to slow down growth of wages, reduce responsibilities of corporations to employee healthcare, retirement and other benefits, as well as cut back jobs in state owned corporations. As we see today, the pro-"bourgeois liberalization" counter-revolutionary force that established the state capitalist system is in fact the CPC itself. Looking at the democratic movement of 1989 from today, the students and workers' call for change and rapid organization indeed had tremendous foresight; it also laid down the possibility for a revolution to happen.

## **A Revolution That Ended Prematurely**

With enthusiasm for change, students in Beijing from different colleges and action groups swiftly assembled into the Beijing Students' Autonomous Federation that was capable of mobilizing hundred of thousands of students. Additionally, student movements spread like wild fire across the whole country. Yet more crucially, mass groups spear-headed by workers were joining the ranks due to the influence of students. By the mid of May, this movement had evolved into a nation-wide mass movement; among the ranks were even soldiers, police and base level officials. The ruling foundation of the CPC was in fact wavering at that moment.

Influence of the working class had gradually risen within the movement, largely because the workers had a more advanced consciousness than the students. The workers in the streets had already realized that it was essential to form a broad united struggle as well as establish autonomous worker organizations. They not only spontaneously recruited other workers,<sup>5</sup> they even took the initiative to approach students in hope to form a general resistance alliance. On May 19<sup>th</sup>, the Beijing Worker's Autonomous Federation (Gongzilian) officially announced their

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<sup>3</sup> "Letter to All Compatriots" released by Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation, May 17<sup>th</sup> 1989.

<sup>4</sup> "A Beijing Worker's Open Letter to the Students", April 28<sup>th</sup> 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Letter written by youth worker and martyr Wu Xiangdong to the workers of the Beijing Dongfeng Television Factory

founding. The Gongzilian advocated for the working class leading the democratic movement, called for all workers nation wide to organize themselves, and demanded the government to stop suppressing the movement or else workers would mobilize city wide strikes.<sup>6</sup> When the government proclaimed martial law, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May, large amounts of troops were ordered to occupy Beijing and other cities. However, the people headed by the workers were not intimidated by the martial law, instead responding with even more energetic resistance against the government. Common people by the thousands occupied roads and set up barricades, workers in Beijing organized “dare-to die” squads to stop troops advancing into the city. From the evening of June 3<sup>rd</sup> to early the morning of June 4<sup>th</sup> – when the so called “army of sons of the people” pointed their weapons towards civilians and tanks rolled over students, the people risked their lives to set up barricades over and over again, fought back against the instruments of the state with stones, bricks and molotovs, setting fire to and destroying many military vehicles in the process.

The news of military crackdown spread swiftly and the situation across the country entered the most heated stage. The people of Beijing continued to fight on after the massacre perpetrated by the army: many military vehicles were burned, new barricades were set up, and martial law troops were denied supply from those not actively involved in the resistance. Thousands upon thousands of common people across the country felt indignant and infuriated by the atrocities, as slogans like “down with the CPC”, “Death to Deng Xiaoping” appeared on the streets. At this point, workers had replaced the students as the backbone of the movement. Protests and demonstrations erupted in cities across the country, bridges were sealed, roads blocked, students occupied campuses, radio stations and obstructed production; workers went on strike, government buildings were attacked by protesters, and arsons and riots were widespread. This was the moment where the movement was closest to evolving into revolution, with the CPC on the verge of losing control over cities. However, students, workers and citizens across the country were unable to assemble quickly enough into a united people’s resistance front and sporadic waves of strikes were also unable to adequately expand in order to culminate in a national general strike, which never materialized. Simultaneously, the CPC was constantly intensifying its propaganda against the movement and the army and police gradually regained control over the situation in the capital and other cities. As a result, iron fist crackdowns were unleashed against mass spontaneous organizing, with even more students, workers and other common people being arrested or martyred. The opportunity for revolution to happen was gradually slipping away.

## **A Lesson Of Fire And Blood**

This vast democratic movement is a historic moment in the Chinese masses’ struggle against state authority and social hierarchy; its memory remains a symbol representing the spirit of people pursuing freedom and justice. However this movement ended in failure. For us though, what is important to examine is not its failure to negotiate some liberal reforms with the regime, but rather its failure to transform the tremendous momentum it had accumulated into a full blown revolution that could overthrow the regime entirely. The lesson of how, despite a revolutionary foundation and potential, this spontaneous mass movement did not successfully develop into a

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<sup>6</sup> “Capital Workers’ Manifesto” released by Gongzilian, May 19<sup>th</sup> 1989.

revolution with the people driving out their dictator and liberating themselves from capitalist ruling class's hands, is what is crucial to learn from this moment of history.

The people had displayed impressive spontaneity, mobility and combativeness over the course of the movement; however, a united resistant front was unable to formulate in time, with students and intellectuals having to take the largest share of responsibility. Although the movement emerged from students and intellectuals' critique against symptoms of the "reform and opening up" policy, the lack of class analysis in their critique prevented them from understanding that political and economic violence are both sides of the same coin. When workers suffering from exploitation wanted to approach and participate in this democratic movement from an economic angle, stressing that workers are the masters of production, the students initially responded coldly and even with rejection — since from their point of view the goal of this movement was solely the democratization of the political system, insomuch that some students even called on workers not to disrupt development of the national economy. Students and intellectuals were unable to understand the relationship between political freedom and class struggle, which in turn prevented them from showing solidarity to workers and their struggle and providing assistance to conscious workers in their efforts to organize other workers. As a result, the workers' role in the movement remained largely supportive of students until the moment of military crackdown. Also, this lack of solidarity demotivated workers from participating and limited the function of worker's power in the movement.

However, another difficult problem that prevented workers from further organizing came from the workers themselves. It is the state mentality of the Chinese workers. After the victory of the Chinese socialist revolution, the CPC claimed that working class and peasantry were the masters of the new state. Yet forty years after the revolution, the state and national economy were firmly in the hands of the ruling class. Unfortunately, the myth of workers "to be in charge in own house" was still deeply rooted, workers saw building the national economy and socialism as their own duty. Even though workers were resentful of and felt betrayed by the reform policies, a majority was still reluctant to give up production and take action. This kind of loyalty for the state obstructed the development of worker's subjective consciousness. After military crackdown of the movement, workers began to participate in resistance in large number due to disappointment towards the state. Thus it can be seen that a rapid paradigm shift is possible for the complacent mass of workers. Spontaneous workers' organizing like the Gongzilian did not plant the seed of worker's autonomy deeply into production lines during the movement, it also failed to link up spontaneous worker' organizations across the country and built up a network that is able to sustain a large scale labor movement; these mistakes are worth to be reflect upon.

When the CPC violently cracked down upon the democratic movement, the common people of Beijing resisted valiantly. Thousands of workers, students and citizens sacrificed their lives for the movement, writing down a tragic yet heroic page of history of the peoples struggle for freedom in China. Yet this piece of history was portrayed by the mainstream liberals as an only non-violent movement. This perspective not only buried a very bloody lesson, it also hid the failure of their non-violent tendencies of resistance. A people's struggle needs to be defended by the people themselves through armed resistance. When the enemy seeks to destroy everything that we have built, abandoning the prospect of armed struggle and blindly upholding non violent principles is shooting oneself in the foot. Student leaders and intellectuals stressed the movement needed to stand fast on peaceful non-violent principles. This was not only because they did not believe that the army and police of the state could massacre unarmed civilians, but more importantly,

they believed the movement's righteousness would manifest itself through non-violent action against violence, and that ultimately this murderous regime would face just punishment. The student leaders and intellectuals confiscated self-defense weapons from demonstrators, and the people were encouraged to destroy or even hand back the weapons abandoned by retreating and disobeying government soldiers. Further, disobeying soldiers who expressed the intention to stand on the people's side were turned away.

Just before the fall of Tiananmen Square, Hou Te-Chien, Liu Xiaobo and other intellectuals declared to demonstrators on the square that the movement had won, because the people had been awakened. Yet what the people truly learned is the fact that a dictator will use whatever means to protect its power; peaceful non-violent principles did not bring about freedom but instead reinforced the dictator's rule. Twenty-eight years after, the people of China continue to suffer from ruthless repression and exploitation. Those so-called liberal democratic countries all choose to turn a blind eye – capitalists in these countries are benefactors of the status quo in China. Justice and liberation can only be achieved through people's own hands, only through self arming do people acquire the means to defeat the slave masters.

## **Lest We Forget The Revolutionary Spirit 'The Martyrs' Struggle Will Be Continued With Bullets And Fire**

From history IRPGF concludes that self-liberation of the masses can only be realized through revolution. Not only we do need to point out the mistake of the lack of class analysis as well as the failure of peaceful non-violent tendencies, it is also necessary that we criticize the "white-washing" of history by liberals. The student leaders and intellectuals that were influenced by liberal ideas bear great responsibility for the revolution of 1989 ending before it had even begun. Inside this movement, peaceful non-violent tendencies were actually reduced to a mechanism of easing up the revolutionary spirit of the people for the ruling class. In fact, historical events that are often praised as victories of non-violent struggle, such as the American Civil Rights movement, only resulted in concessions made by the ruling class once faced with an imminent danger of revolution.

In this current global war against state authority, capitalism and all forms of kyriarchy, we will form a common resistance front with people living under repressive state authority, workers squeezed by capitalists for profit, women oppressed by patriarchy, refugees and migrants under attack by xenophobia, indigenous people whose homelands have been invaded, people displaced from their communities by nation states, LGBTQ folk socially marginalized and brutalized by the state, and any other groups that have been oppressed due to their color, religion, culture or any other reason. As a revolutionary collective, we see spreading and defending social revolution around the world as our mission; to eliminate any social constructs that obstruct unity like state, nationalism, racism, sexism and religious fundamentalism. As an armed collective, we will stand together with all people who are oppressed, exploited or facing annihilation, to resist murderous regimes, imperialists and fascist powers.

Today's China internally imposes colonial rule toward groups of people that possess unique identities, languages and history and externally practices imperialist expansion against third world countries. Power struggle within the ruling class has become extremely fierce, corruption within the government is getting more severe by the days, and exploitation and violence is

the new norm in everyday life. Actions of resistance and social turbulence concerning workers' rights, land justice, the environment and other issues are intensifying continuously. We believe that China will become one of the major battle fields in this global war and when that day comes, IRPGF will stand together with the people of China and fight in unity until victory. We believe that the sound of thousands upon thousands of people singing the Internationale will once again echo throughout Tiananmen Square.<sup>7</sup>

Tiananmen People's Martyrs Will Never Be Forgotten!  
Carry on The Revolutionary Spirit With Bullets and Fire!  
Long Live People's Autonomous Horizontal Organizing!  
Long Live People's Armed Struggle!  
Long Live The People's Revolution!

International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces

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<sup>7</sup> Reference materials: Zhang Liang "The Tiananmen Papers" (2001), Walder & Xiaoxia "'Workers in the Tiananmen Protests: The Politics of the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation" (1993), Wu Renhua "Major Events, Tiananmen 1989" (2011), Choi Suk-fong "My June Fourth Witness"



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