

Capitalism in China: The Case for International Solidarity.

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There is controversy in the UK labour movement over China. Arguments range from assertions that China remains a socialist state albeit in the primary stages to support for China on the grounds that a strong China is a counterbalance to US-led economic imperialism and military adventures. Putting the controversy aside, this article instead makes the case for the solidarity with Chinese workers and citizens on the receiving end of capitalist exploitation and state repression in the hinterlands and heartlands of this emerging global power. We equate resistance in China to resistance to authoritarianism in general, whether in the form of right-wing populism or one-party rule.

Capitalist labour relations exist in China. Their reintroduction was a cornerstone of paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's neoliberal strategy allowing a minority to get rich first. Which they did: the share of income earned by the top 10 per cent of the population went from 27 per cent in 1978 to 41 per cent in 2015. In the same period, the share of the bottom 50 per cent dropped from 50 per cent to 27 per cent.¹

China's adoption of capitalism has lifted millions of people out of absolute poverty. But the cost of this transformation in terms of environmental degradation and social inequality must be a core concern of the international labour and trade union movement. Neoliberal globalisation teaches us that solidarity is not a national undertaking as capital and ideology cross borders with ease in search of new markets and opportunities for accumulation.

We need to do the same. For example, trade unionists and activists everywhere can learn from the extraordinary strike wave in China's auto parts industry in 2010 that generated wage rises of 20-30 per cent. The global rise of populist authoritarianism and its nationalist ideologies renders global resistance even more important. In China, authoritarian rule has taken on an altogether more dangerous shade under Xi Jinping's leadership as labour activists, feminists, minorities and human rights defenders and others have found to their cost.²

Labour

In China, capitalist labour relations are governed by laws that look reasonable on paper and indeed appear to buck the global neo-liberal trend of labour market deregulation. But they are widely ignored. The absence of core trade union rights such as freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining backed up by protection of the right to strike are collective rights denied to the Chinese working class. The notional right to strike was deleted from the Constitution of China in 1982 at precisely the time when China embarked on her journey from a command economy to a market economy.

Nevertheless, it is not the case that capitalist labour relations in China allow predatory capitalists and their agents to operate at will. Labour scholars from different disciplines and perspectives such as Ching Kwan Lee, Pun Ngai, Chang Kai and Chris Chan acknowledge that the activism of the Chinese working class, including a reserve army of rural-urban migrants that numbers up to 250 million, has been central to a gradual tempering of capitalist exploitation in China.

Capitalist exploitation has been institutionalised. A watershed moment in this process was the passing of three important labour-related laws in 2008 that most commentators agree were a response to rising levels of strikes and labour protests. The Labour Contract Law, the Labour Disputes Mediation and Arbitration Law and the Employment Promotion Law were testament to both the universalisation

of capitalist labour relations in China; and Chinese Communist Party's concern that the militancy and social unrest could develop into a threat to its one-party rule.

In other words, the 2008 laws were an outcome of the growing capacity of a dramatically expanding working class to get its voice heard. The only legal trade union in China, the state-controlled All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), has failed to make its presence felt in capitalist firms and remains largely restricted to its traditional role as a welfare arm of the state in what is left of a restructured state sector i.e. good on picnics and birthdays for model workers; absent on collective bargaining and organising. Little wonder then that workers often take matters into their own hands despite the risks. The strike chart is generated by China Labour Bulletin's online strike map and is not comprehensive.

Industry event count



Indeed, as one progressive official from the Shenzhen Federation of Trade Unions (under the ACFTU) stated in 2009 that 'economic strikes are normal'. So normal in fact that some labour NGOs and labour lawyers in Guangdong province attempted to reduce the organising void left by the ACFTU by providing support to striking workers: training on collective bargaining and dispute resolution; building transnational solidarity along supply chains for example.

However, a nasty new normal has since emerged. It was heralded by a co-ordinated wave of detentions and arrests of labour activists and labour NGO staff in 2015. Prison sentences followed – lighter than many expected due to international support from trade unionists. The new normal has since turned its attention to a trend of independent Marxist activism that emerged in universities. When workers at Jasic Technology struck for the right to organise a trade union to combat illegal workplace practices, students from Marxist reading groups rented a nearby flat and coordinated solidarity. Riot police detained dozens of students, strikers were arrested and charged, and the Marxist Study Groups were either re-organised or shut down by university authorities.

Terror Capitalism

Xi Jinping's repressive policies in Xinjiang province are directed at Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities. Under the guise of 'sinicisation', Uyghurs have been subjected to a panopticon nightmare of surveillance, detention in specially built camps and abuse that includes torture and sexual violence according to witness testimonies. Over one million Uyghurs have been incarcerated. Oppression is oppression and the Chinese state is committing serial human rights abuses.

The state's narrative towards the Uyghurs draws on the US-led War on Terror recycled as a 'People's War on Terror'. Darren Byler and Carolina Sanchez Boe use the term 'terror capitalism' to capture the

technologies of repression that generate enhanced profits for capitalist firms. Byler and Boe summarise the process: state contracts to build surveillance equipment are tendered to private corporations and deployed against target groups, in this case the Uyghurs. The data collected facilitates repression in Xinjiang and the technologies are further refined for sale to other countries. Analogous with unfree labour, Uyghurs are frequently allocated to work for capitalist enterprises all over China upon release. There is evidence that some factories 'employing' Uyghur labour are part of supply chains headed by major international brands.³

Just as the international labour movement has been at the forefront of resistance to the US War on Terror, we need to put similar energies to condemning the People's War on Terror in Xinjiang. We are well-placed to expose international brands benefitting from unfree labour and tech companies involved in developing intrusive surveillance technologies for use in China and elsewhere. We have nothing to gain from what Shoshana Zuboff has called *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* and its terrifying manifestation in Xinjiang.

The Struggle for Democracy in Hong Kong

In 1997, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region signalled an end to British colonial rule. Acting essentially as well-armed drug barons, the British had acquired the 'lease' of Hong Kong via their determination to sell opium in China in the 19th Century. They gave little thought to democracy until the 1989 Democracy Movement was brutally suppressed in Mainland China, prompting the British authorities begin a cautious path to partially elected governance. The people of Hong Kong extracted some functions of democracy such as freedom of the press and the right to form trade unions. But full democracy did not materialise under British rule.

Chinese sovereignty is premised on 'One Country Two Systems' that guarantees Hong Kong's way of life for 50 years. The Basic Law state – in vague language – a road to universal suffrage. But universal suffrage has not materialised.

Democracy movements since include the Anti-Article 23 Movement in 2003 (against a new National Security Law); the Umbrella Movement of 2014 (for universal suffrage) and the ten-month Anti-Extradition Law Movement of 2019-20 against an extradition arrangement with mainland China. The latter led to the militarisation of the Hong Kong police force and over 8,000 arrests during often violent conflicts with demonstrators. In July 2020, Beijing imposed a National Security Law bypassing the Legislative Council of Hong Kong – a partially elected parliament.

The Anti-Extradition Law Movement quickly morphed into a full Democracy Movement after the Hong Kong government withdrew the law. It included innovative forms of protest from mass singing of songs in shopping malls to massive marches organised by the Civil and Human Rights Front. A CRHF march on 16 June 2019 arguably attracted up two million people. The Democracy Movement in Hong Kong is made up of many political components. They range from a small minority seeking independence for Hong Kong to left-wing groups such as the Lausan Collective who identify with social movements elsewhere such as Black Lives Matter and all points in-between.

Organised labour is crucial to the movement's survival and progressive goals. This includes both the traditional unions such as the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions and the recently organised myriad of industry-level unions. Organised labour is important as companies such as Cathay Pacific – owned by the UK company John Swire – have sacked staff supporting the Democracy Movement such as cabin crew union leader Rebecca Sy. A 'triple strike' involving workers, students and smaller businesses on 5 August 2019 brought out over 600,000 people.

Recently, the focus has been on the demand for the right to organise political strikes that are currently banned under Hong Kong laws inherited from British colonialists. Political strikes could respond to ‘big capital’ politics as evidenced by the British-registered bank HSBC that welcomed the draconian new National Security Law. The right to industrial action for political goals and the removal of restrictions on the right to strike are also demands raised by the FBU and other unions here in the UK.

We argue against viewing oppression through a two-camp lens and that resistance to all forms of authoritarianism deserves labour movement support wherever it takes place. Organised labour and trade unions resist Islamophobia in the West and we must show the same commitment to its application against Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in China. Unions were central to struggles for the universal suffrage that the people of Hong Kong seek and they need us to stand with them. These struggles are indivisible to the struggles of the Chinese working class – for freedom of association, protection of the right to strike and full democratic participation and control of their existence. There can be no blind spots, solidarity for workers should not be conditional.

¹ Piketty, Yang and Zucman (2019) <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2019/04/01/income-inequality-is-growing-fast-in-china-and-making-it-look-more-like-the-us/>

² Howell and Pringle (2019). ‘Shades of Authoritarianism and State–Labour Relations in China’, *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 57 (2) pp 223-246

³ End Uyghur Forced Labour <https://enduyghurforcedlabour.org/>