

Class Struggle in China

Red Guard Scabs on Chinese Workers

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In China and similarly throughout the world, the trade unions are a part of the state machine; their function is to integrate the working class into the nation's economy. Their main task is defined by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as stimulating labor discipline and productivity:

"... the executive committee of the General Confederation of Labor that met July 10, 1953, ordered all union cadres to regard the strengthening of discipline as their fundamental permanent task.' If the results of this campaign proved unsatisfactory, then it would be necessary to 'punish in an appropriate manner the recalcitrant elements that constantly interfere with discipline.'" ¹

But as in other totalitarian regimes, the danger of the trade unions appearing to the workers as policemen pure and simple has been demonstrated a number of times. In the early days of the regime (1949-52), the bureaucracy's intense concern to raise productivity led them to create huge union machines whose sole purpose was to persuade workers to accept productivity increases and wage cuts.

This provoked a series of wildcat strike waves which went completely outside the unions, and thus implicitly threatened to lead to a direct confrontation with the state. The seriousness of the situation forced the Party to admit that there had been a "terrible lack of communication between the unions and the workers."

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Here's a good one! A listener from Shanghai asks, "What about self-management?"

In 1952, the state had to change its union policy. The trade union bureaucracy was granted a certain “independence” vis-a-vis the rest of the state, and the unions were given license to “defend,” within certain proscribed limits, the immediate economic demands of the workers.

But even though these measures were aimed solely at increasing the union’s capacity for controlling the proletariat, they have often been the subject of bitter controversy within the state bourgeoisie: the union bureaucracy has frequently been accused of following an “economistic” line which runs counter to the requirements of “Socialist Construction.”

Workers Against the Cultural Revolution

During the Cultural Revolution and its campaigns against “egoism” and “economism”, the unions were dissolved and replaced by the revolutionary committees and mass “Worker Congresses.” But more recently the bureaucracy has had to restore the unions (April 1975). They remain indispensable to the proper functioning of the capitalist state and economy.

After 1952, despite a whole series of crises which produced periods of ideological turmoil within the state bourgeoisie (100 Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, etc.), Chinese capital underwent a certain expansion, which corresponded to the worldwide reconstruction period of capitalism.

This enabled the bourgeois to keep the workers’ struggles within “reasonable” limits. Wages remained low, but the workers received improved services, including free or very cheap housing, transport and medical facilities, social security, etc. All this had to be paid for, of course, by an increased rate of exploitation.

Nevertheless, the overall trend for Chinese capital was towards stagnation, especially after the withdrawal of Russian capital and technical aid after 1960. The onset of the global economic crisis toward the middle of the sixties, and China’s inability to industrialize at a rate sufficient to allow it to face up to increasingly severe world competition, produced even more insurmountable problems for the Chinese capitalists.

The only hope of increasing the competitiveness of Chinese capital lay in intensifying the exploitation of the working-class. The inter-bureaucratic feud which provoked the Cultural Revolution of 1966–68 originated out of two different conceptions of how this was to be done.

The so-called “capitalist road” advocated by Liu Shao-chi expressed the interests of an entrenched bureaucracy in the Party, unions, and civil service. They favored the retention of wage differentials and the extension of material incentives for increased productivity (more consumer goods, higher wages, etc.).

They also stood for a more efficient technological apparatus and rapprochement with the Soviet “revisionists.” Against this faction, Mao (by now representing a minority tendency in the Party) advocated self-reliance vis-a-vis the world market and the active mobilization of the “popular masses” behind the state and the economy—by ideological rather than material incentives—to produce more. To combat his rivals Mao could count on the support of the grossly-swollen university population and the army.

Both these lines represented different strategies for attacking the working class. The Cultural Revolution inaugurated by Mao was not, as the Western Press so often claims, a movement to re-establish revolutionary power in China. Such a power had never existed. Rather it was an attempt to browbeat the working class in the interests-of national capital.

This is very clearly illustrated by the main practical orientation it adopted. The main targets of Mao’s student shock troops, the Red Guards, were the big industrial centers. The Red Guards poured in their millions into the cities to impose a new ideological discipline on the urban population—and thus overwhelmingly on the working class.

The Red Guards frenziedly attacked the slightest manifestation of non-conformity in the community; they took over entire municipal administration to force the population to accept their ideological strictures; and they rushed into the factories to teach the workers how to follow “Mao Tse-tung thought.”

They set up “Seize Control Committees” to encourage production, attacking any attempt by the workers to put forward “economistic” demands.

After some months of the Red Guard assault the workers began to respond in a way that Mao had not bargained for. They initiated a series of spontaneous resistance struggles which went further than any other outburst of working class revolt against the Maoist regime.

Although some of these struggles were led by, or lined up with, the various bourgeois factions fighting each other in a more chaotic situation, their most important characteristic was that they tended to express the immediate class interests of the workers.

For example, in Shanghai in January 1967 a massive strike movement broke out in opposition to wage cuts and the ideological stimulants offered by the Red Guards. Beginning with the dockers, the strike quickly became general, spreading to all the industrial zones of the city.

The railway workers extended their strike throughout Manchuria, paralysing whole sectors of the economy. In the province of Fujian, factories were occupied, public buildings attacked and state surpluses distributed. In some areas the workers seized stocks of arms and formed defence guards to protect themselves against all comers.

Amid these spontaneous struggles, political tendencies emerged which began to call for the complete overthrow of the bureaucratic regime. For lack of information, it is difficult to know whether these tendencies represented a leftward turn of the Red Guards in response to the workers' resistance, or whether they represented a genuine though confused development of working class consciousness.

The Hunan-based Shen Wu-lien (shortened form of Hunan Provincial Proletarian Revolutionary Great Alliance Committee) began to say that China had come under the control of a "decaying Red Capitalist class," that the present state machine had to be utterly smashed and replaced with an administration of the Paris Commune type.

They claimed it was "necessary to go into the question of assessment of the past seventeen years," that the "real revolution, the revolution to negate the past seventeen years, has basically not begun ...".

Although citing the authority of the "Wise supreme commander, Comrade Mao Tse-tung," they criticized Mao's attempts to set up the three-in-one 'revolutionary committees', which they saw as "a re-instatement of the bureaucrats already toppled in the January revolution.

Inevitably (they) will be the form of political power to be usurped by the bourgeoisie in which the Army and the local bureaucrats are to play a leading role." They called for the abolition of the 'standing army even though the latter was one of Mao's main strongholds; they seem to have accepted the 'ultra left' epithet given to them by the official Maoists; and some of these 'ultra lefts' seem to have been in favor of creating a new party.

After the restoration of 'order' Shen Wu-lien was denounced as a counter-revolutionary Trotskyist tendency and suppressed. ³ The real significance of groups like Shen Wu-lien will perhaps be clearer in the light of future class struggles in China, but it certainly appears to represent a groping towards clarity on the part of a section of the Chinese proletariat and of some of the ex-Red Guards who became disillusioned with Mao. ⁴

In any case, there is no doubt that the Cultural Revolution had stirred up a hornet's nest which was rapidly getting out of control. The strike movement provoked a panic on the part of the Maoist bureaucracy, leading them to issue frantic calls for a return to work, to set up the grass-roots 'revolutionary committees' to try to integrate the energy of the masses into the state machine, and to moderate the whole tone of the Cultural Revolution, eventually abandoning it altogether.

But Mao also had to resort to strike-breaking measures and overt repression. All over the country the army and the Red Guards were sent in to revive production, smash strikes, and restore the norms of capitalist discipline. The strike-breaking role of the Red Guards is succinctly expressed in the following statements from the official press at the time:

"On January 8th, when work at the port of Shanghai was stopped, the revolutionary students of Shanghai, Futau, Chiao L'ung and T'ungehi went to the port to replace the absent dockers."

—*People's Daily*, January 11, 1967

"On January 11, 240 Red Guards from the Railway College Red Flag Commune in Peking went to Peking station to replace striking railway workers... order at Peking station was more or less re-established: our men got the train working. Bad men had incited the masses to overthrow order in the stations,

damage installations, and go on strike; and this went so far that certain sections of the railway network were paralysed. This was a revolt against the Party.”

—*Kuang Ming Daily*, January 30, 1967. 5

As the army and Red Guards restored order, the Maoist bureaucracy got on with clearing out the ‘ultra left’ tendencies and stabilizing its power. The ‘class struggle’ rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution was dropped; similarly the extremist and ‘self-reliant’ foreign policy was replaced with a policy of rapprochement with the western imperialist bloc, showing China’s inability to pose as a third imperialist camp independent from the two ‘Super Powers’.

The danger of prematurely playing its extreme left card, of attempting to mobilize and channel the energy of the masses, had become clear to the Maoist bureaucracy. Since the Cultural Revolution it has become more ‘moderate’ in all things.

But the subsequent periodic recourse to ideological campaigns and leftist phraseology (e.g. the anti-Confucius campaign) shows that the problem of how to mystify and integrate the working class is far from being solved by Mao’s regime.

As for the Chinese workers, their response to the attack posed by the Cultural Revolution, and their continued resistance since then, have shown that they are able to fight their way out of Maoist mystifications and confront the Chinese bureaucracy for what it is: the personification of capital.

In the next great proletarian world offensive, the workers of Shanghai, Peking and Canton will play their own vital role in the global destruction of bourgeois state power, of which the Chinese People’s Republic is just one cog among many.

Endnotes

1. George Lefranc, *Le Syndicalisme Dans Le Monde*, p. 102.
2. Editorial in *Workers’ Daily*, August 6, 1950, (see Reeve, p. 29).
3. For a translation of one of Shen Wu-lien’s texts see *International Socialism*, No. 37, (June/July 1969). The citations here are from that translation.
4. *Intercontinental Press*, May 6, 1974, “Interview with a Former Red Guard Leader.”
5. Both these extracts cited in Reeve, pp. 143–4.



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