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China

Courage at Sitong Bridge

- Features -

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Peng Lifa disappeared into the clutches of Chinese security forces in Beijing after he unfurled banners off a bridge with slogans attacking the autocracy of President Xi Jinping. But his daring act—and his manifesto calling for mass action to achieve democracy—have stirred hope for change and a discussion of strategy among Chinese on the mainland and around the world.

In a rare display of dissent just days before the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a man disguised as a construction worker hung banners on October 13 with provocative political slogans—calling on the masses to strike at work and at school—from a busy intersection on the Sitong Bridge in Beijing. One read “We want food, not PCR tests. We want freedom, not lockdowns. We want respect, not lies. We want reform, not Cultural Revolution. We want a vote, not a leader. We want to be citizens, not slaves.” The other said, “Strike at school and strike at work,” and attacked the head of state itself: “Oust the dictator, traitor Xi Jinping.”

Online users quickly discovered the protester’s identity as Peng Lifa, a researcher of electrophysics who had posted some of his demands online days prior to his public protest. These demands were excerpted from a larger document that he has allegedly posted on Researchgate under the name ‘Peng Zaizhou’ (now deleted but [archived](#) by online users on a different site), which details an extensive strategy for mobilization and a more concrete vision for political reform.

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Peng’s protest came at a critical juncture for the CCP. Xi was eager to consolidate his third term in power at the party’s national congress this year and potentially identify a new cohort of leadership. The congress obliged, helping Xi take his authority to new heights by electing a Politburo Standing Committee composed entirely of his loyalists.

Meanwhile, China’s pandemic strategy has seen mixed results, as its draconian quarantine measures have triggered discontent while its larger economic policy has deepened exploitation of everyday workers and shown signs of slowdown and other weakness. Many college graduates are unemployed, as China’s precarious gig economy has massively ballooned in recent years. Xi and the party elites are all the more keen to preserve political stability despite these social contradictions. Peng’s protest, though small in scale, disrupted the regime’s intention to completely regulate dissent on the eve of the national congress.

Within a week of Peng’s brief act of dissent, anonymous Chinese overseas students and other diaspora allies have shown solidarity by [creating](#) posters and other graphics to amplify Peng’s demands and plastering them in over 250 universities and other public areas around the world. People in China are reproducing Peng’s demands against Xi and for mass action by scribbling on public bathroom walls, with strangers Airdropping each other dissident messages on the streets. These are no pre-revolutionary conditions, of course, but this level of reaction is not only rare, but testifies to the fact that his calls for popular strikes in civil society to mobilize the masses against authoritarianism rule have struck an important nerve.

While Peng’s framework contains important contradictions that we must unpack, his key demands are a crucial step that must be amplified by the Left in the short term: to oppose Xi’s attempt to rule beyond term limits through the mobilization of a popular mass movement. Only mass mobilization of civil society can open up the space to build an independent socialist mass opposition, which centers on bridging the minimum demands adequately raised by Peng and the maximum demand of building genuine institutions of socialist democracy against authoritarian capital.

Peng's vision and strategy

Peng's document begins with a clear exposition of his strategy and political vision. He identifies Xi's dictatorial rule—which he likens to Chinese warlord Yuan Shikai's usurpation of Kuomintang rule in the early 20th-century—as a key problem. And thus, civil society needs to rise up en masse, from universities to workplaces, to “exert pressure” on the regime to oppose Xi's rule. A political alternative would be centered on expanding suffrage in order to best safeguard the rights and livelihoods of Chinese people. Peng also emphasizes that those in “lower society” must be empowered, providing a lengthy list of whom he considers the protagonists of this campaign: unemployed people (including young college graduates who cannot find jobs), migrant workers, those who cannot afford medical services, service workers, those who have faced eviction, etc.

In addition to classroom and workplace strikes, he advocates a series of tactics that include various nonviolent direct actions, from setting up roadblocks to plastering the demands throughout the city. He calls on people to spread the demands in social media networks—even government internal communication networks—and to surround the CGTN office and occupy Tiananmen Square.

[Peng Lifa's] commitment to popular struggle pushes beyond the traditional consensus among Chinese dissidents, which privileges Western establishment intervention over the independent activity of the Chinese masses.

The framework of struggle is an eclectic mixture of reformist strategies. Peng never calls for the end of CCP rule in the document, but develops structures for reforms that would, in his view, democratize CCP rule. Some policy proposals are highly specific: He includes a proposal for a “People's Republic of China National Suffrage Committee” that would ensure democratic participation in elections, roughly modeled after liberal democracies. For Peng, this process would be easily doable with a technical reform. The regime could simply repurpose the extensive network of COVID testing sites as voting stations. The document lists other specific pandemic policies that would grant more flexibility to everyday people, and even develops a sample spending budget proposal at one point.

For the Left, much is still left wanting in the program, but we must be clear that any further demands for the expansion of workers' power and democracy can only be built on an energized civil society and mass movement—a point that Peng clearly observes and attempts to address. Even as Peng still operates within the framework of liberalism, citing the texts of late right-wing dissident Liu Xiaobo and “color revolution” advocates and calling for the safeguarding of the market economy, his desire to stimulate mass action opens up new opportunities for struggle for the Left. Such a commitment to popular struggle pushes beyond the traditional consensus among Chinese dissidents, which privileges Western establishment intervention over the independent activity of the Chinese masses.

Strengths and limits of Peng's vision

As such, we must clearly amplify the strengths and identify the weaknesses in Peng's text. While document's political framework is limited and fragmented—calling for policies that may even be endorsed by liberal reformers loyal to the party itself—it correctly recognizes the struggles of workers during the pandemic and the need for their voices to be heard in pushing for a more democratic system of representation.

Directly criticizing Xi's unaccountable leadership even within the already-degenerated rule of law under the CCP provides an effective rallying point to begin stirring the discontents of the Chinese people into some form of mass action. The demand may seem rather basic, but we must remember how far removed Chinese society has been from experiencing any form of mass organization on a national scale. Socialist demands are but a maximization of the masses' capacity for collective self-determination to build democratic institutions, so our demands for further revolutionary transformation must emerge from and in concert with a broader mass movement resisting the most basic violations of the rule of law.

At the center of Peng's strategy is his call for a national strike from the workplace to the classroom.

Indeed, Peng's vision of democracy leaves the class hierarchy of Chinese society, as structured by the CCP, fundamentally untouched. In other words, it identifies the core issues of Chinese society only in part, and thus, can only offer an ultimately ineffectual political solution in the long run. The authoritarian and bureaucratic structure of the CCP is powered by capital accumulation; in other words, the political organization of society is built upon a strict division of labor and an autocratic surveillance infrastructure meant to reinforce one another. Genuine democratic representation cannot exist within the mold of CCP governance, and electoral reforms without changes to the political power of the ruling class would miss the point: that under the logic of market economics, people cannot be empowered to collectively plan and re-organize society along the principles of freedom and self-determination, and to actually prioritize the needs and well-being of the community over profit.

Peng's technocratic solution to maximizing democracy by repurposing the extensive networks of COVID testing reveals two crucial things. His proposal correctly suggests that China's current level of modernization and productive capacity already makes a highly developed system of democratic governance possible on a mass scale. On the other hand, what Peng does not grasp is that genuine democracy cannot emerge as a technical reform in a system of governance fundamentally built to deprioritize the needs of the laboring masses for the benefits of a ruling class.

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Nonetheless, Peng's proposal that all sectors of civil society must be mobilized to occasion change opens up space for the masses to organize for these more radical demands. From that point, we must ask further clarifying questions. How ought we build connections between these forces in civil society to build a successful movement? Which forces should lead and what kinds of political program is needed to deepen the movement? What forms of institutions and organizations are necessary to coordinate and ensure space for democratic assembly and debate on larger strategic questions between different sectors of the movement? At the center of Peng's strategy is his call for a national strike from the workplace to the classroom. This targeting of the country's productive capacities adequately reflects the growing awareness of Chinese workers' power as a class in an economy that is more proletarianized than ever before. Youth unemployment has [soared](#) to a record 20 percent of the workforce in July, and the last few years under the pandemic have seen a massive [expansion](#) of the gig economy.

Whereas the workers and students during the Tiananmen movement of 1989 saw only a tepid and uneasy alliance at best, Peng readily draws links between the two. "To strike at work and at school" have become two aspects of the same strategy. As a key site of social reproduction of labor, the school is integrally linked to the country's productive capacities, such that student and workers' strikes should be seen in the same continuum of struggle against the commodity economy. The quick response of Chinese overseas students to echo and build upon on Peng's demands internationally across cities and university campuses further testifies to the potential of youth and student power to help develop an independent mass opposition with the Chinese working class.

But Peng's version of this strategy is in need of a more rigorous programmatic vision of revolution, in which political power would be seized by workers set to reorganize how Chinese society's production relations are structured. Contrast Peng's key demands to those of Beijing's Workers Autonomous Federation (WAF) [workers](#) in 1989: "the WAF's pamphlets at the time accused the CCP of hijacking the people's authority to manage their own economic resources, and demanded that the CCP must cede power to the workers to determine the course of the country's productive industries."

In other words, genuine democracy must entail the working class seizing power, beyond calling for technocratic adjustments that leave the core of the society's economic structure untouched. And such a kind of "proletarian dictatorship" does not center on one-party rule of any kind, but instead—in the words of some Tiananmen workers themselves in an interview with Hong Kong Trotskyist publication *October Review*—"must be based on an adequate

democratic structure and legal system.” In contrast, Peng’s awkward deference to color revolution as a strategic framework to mobilize the masses reveals the narrowness of political horizon in Chinese society.

The Tiananmen workers never got their chance to concretely realize their vision of political democracy, and indeed, the CCP has always been [keen](#) to smother any alternative programs for socialist democracy from developing out of the masses. It has worked in the party’s favor to reduce people’s political options into mere variants of a false dichotomy: either liberal demands for Western intervention or Western-style bourgeois democracies, or reformist opposition operating loyally within the party’s institutional apparatuses. Peng’s manifesto does not fully provide us with a coherent third path, but paves the way for something like it to emerge by emboldening the self-activity of the masses. He hesitates to call for any radical action against the authority of the party itself, while drawing unevenly from Western color revolution methods and preserving the logic of market accumulation.

Peng’s document nonetheless provides us with a first step forward, and now we must build upon it to keep catalyzing spaces for mass action and practice collective organization to develop programmatic clarity. Only then can we create new modes of struggle in a society with few opportunities to practice mass mobilization and organization on a national scale (beyond spontaneous upsurges), against the surveilling and co-opting infrastructure of the state.

Building the movement we need

To effectively build on Peng’s dissent requires organically developing more Chinese workers and students as organizers in their community—locally and in the diaspora—to energize mass engagement to collectively build new programs for socialist democracy. This core of organizers should not rush to compel people into party-building or other forms of militant action in the short term that would surely quicken government clampdown. Instead, they can cultivate the working class’s political consciousness by intentionally bringing together politically advanced members of their community to synthesize the lessons of different local, national, or diaspora struggles.

We must not mistake Peng’s protest and the growing discontent of Chinese workers as a sign that the time is now ripe for immediate revolutionary struggle. The historically unprecedented scale of CCP’s surveillance state, coupled with the political incoherence of the Chinese working class, suggest the need for transitional programs and demands. Working-class forces are in a similar situation today as the decimation of the Chinese communists by the Kuomintang in the late 1920s—a terrain of growing social contradictions though with highly adverse conditions for organizing. And thus, as Leon Trotsky [reflected](#) at the time, we must focus on “fighting at present not for power, but to maintain, to consolidate and to develop its contact with the masses for the sake of the struggle for power in the future.” Transitional demands encourages Chinese workers and students to sharpen their own political analyses and practice exercising power by raising demands that can connect to broad masses of Chinese society while exposing the limits of the Chinese political system’s contradictions. This can include pressing beyond Peng’s demands to articulate the need for fully-elected local and national assemblies for decision-making, democratically representing workers and other dispossessed elements of Chinese society—including the full right to self-determination for Uyghurs, Tibetans, Hong-Kongers, and other minorities.

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We can further build on Peng’s document to directly introduce demands that center on broadening workers’ independent power, like calling for the right to form independent unions and other organs of dual power, which presses against the limits of liberal constitutionalism partially expressed by Peng. Thus, Peng’s program to unleash mass action to restore some of the basic democratic freedoms in China can make space for socialists to promote transitional [demands](#) that, as Ernest Mandel illustrates, “allow the masses to learn, through their own experience, the extension of their own freedom comes up against the restrictive institutions of bourgeois democracy.”

Such a nucleus of socialist organizers would not seek to centralize different sectors of society into its one organization's ranks, but as Mandel also [writes](#), exist simply to crystallize the political consciousness of the masses "in a process of continuous organisation." Again, we must look to the lessons of the past. Zhang Yueran, in his incisive reflection critically reflecting on the role of Maoist student organizers in the JASIC workers' struggle in 2018, [remarked](#) that more crucial than consolidating a party vanguard at the moment, Chinese organizers should not lose focus on strengthening "the organisational capacity of workers." Developing rigorous and cohesive political programs should not work in lieu of helping to expand the "necessary organisational capacity for workers to take massive action as on making sure workers' struggle unfolds in the correct political direction, under the guidance of revolutionary theory."

A genuine socialist program for change should model the very institutions and practices of democracy we want in the road to revolution itself.

Revolutionary socialist democracy in China can only be institutionalized and won by the masses adopting such an organizational praxis from the start. "Seven Theses on Socialism and Democracy," written in exile in 1957 by Chinese Marxist Wang Fanxi, formulates a vision for revolutionary democracy in China. A genuine "proletarian dictatorship" requires a "system of divided power" that recognizes the right for "opposition parties" and other organized forces to exist. Workers' power would not be centralized in one party, let alone one party-state, and "must under no circumstances replace the political power democratically elected by the toilers as a whole." This entails

"an end to the present system in the Communist countries, where government is a facade behind which secretaries of the party branches assume command. The ruling party's strategic policies must first be discussed and approved by an empowered parliament (or soviet) that includes opposition parties and factions, and only then should they be implemented by government." [1]

This is no utopian program for after the revolution, but a reality that would only dialectically emerge from the cultivated practice and organizational capacity of everyday people's struggle in response to the forces of authoritarian capital right now. In other words, we must build a revolutionary nucleus of organizers to continually push for socialist perspectives in the movement, alongside, not in place of, empowering a diverse array of other independent mass organizations in coalition with one another, including workers' organizations, LGBTQ+ student groups, feminist collectives, diaspora groups, among others. And thus, a genuine socialist program for change should model the very institutions and practices of democracy we want in the road to revolution itself.

And so, the task today is to quicken and build the mass mobilization that Peng demands, and as Students for Hong Kong [encourages](#) in their recent statement, "create more spaces for independent assembly and discussion ... to continue spreading this fire of liberty." Diaspora activists have an outsized role to play in helping to facilitate and build such spaces, especially filling in the kinds of organizational infrastructure that would be too risky to build and maintain in the mainland. We can keep promoting spaces for exchange and coalition-building, continuing to build a base of people in civil society who can eventually mobilize in the scale that Peng imagines in his document—and more.

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[1] Wang Fanxi's "Seven Theses on Socialism and Democracy" is available in the Haymarket collection of Fanxi's writings, Mao Zedong Thought: <https://www.haymarketbooks.org/books/1639-mao-zedong-thought>