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China

Down with corruption; reclaim our land

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On November 21, 1927, under the leadership of Peng Pai, pioneer of the Chinese communist revolution as well as a committed socialist, the country's first rural Soviet administration was established in area of Hailufeng, Guangdong province. Thus began the first chapter of the communist movement in China. On November 21, 2011, less than a few kilometres away from the founding site, at Wukan village (part of Lufeng city in eastern Guangdong province), a few thousand villagers took to the street. Holding up signs that read "Down with dictatorship", "Curb corruption", "Down with government-business collusion" and "Return land to the people", villagers marched to the government headquarters at Lufeng city to protest against officials' illegal land seizures and sales.

Their demands were clear: to reclaim the land sold without the consent of the people, to release public accounts concerning the some 400 hectares of land seized and sold since 1978, to launch investigations into fraudulent elections and to enforce the Organic Law of Village Committees to hold fair and open elections. The demonstration ended peacefully after the acting mayor received the villagers' petition.

Illegal land sales prompt villagers' mobilisation

Since the early 1990s, the villagers of Wukan had launched petitions at the local governments of Lufeng, Shanwei, and Guangdong province, only in vain. A proper reply from officials was never made. Without democratic elections, the secretary of the Communist Party's local chapter, Xue Chang, has stayed in power for 41 years. Abusing its position as the so-called representative of Wukan, the village committee has sold and leased hundreds of hectares of land without consulting the villagers, and yet in the past few decades, villagers have received less than 500 yuan in compensation.

The ongoing demonstrations were prompted by allegations that Hong Kong-based businessperson Chen Wenqing, who is originally from Wukan, had colluded with the village committee to strike a private land-sale deal with luxury home developer Country Garden, thereby gaining the 700 million yuan that was supposed to be paid to the villagers. As the representative of Guangdong province and Shanwei city in the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the honorary president of the Confederacy of Hong Kong Shanwei Clansmen Ltd, as well as owner of various hotels and development companies in the mainland, Chen holds numerous official positions both in the mainland and Hong Kong. In recent months, as Country Garden began its construction work, villagers could no longer put up with the situation.

On September 22, 2011, the villagers of Wukan rose up and launched a mass protest at the municipal government, after which officials promised to investigate the problem. The village committee leadership that was under suspicion immediately fled the area, leaving the village without an administration.

To prevent a state of anarchy and to strengthen the mobilisation of the people, villagers filled the leadership vacuum by democratically electing 13 representatives and setting up a Provisional Board of Representatives to conduct village affairs. In mid-October, villagers also established a Women's Representatives Federation to support the ongoing struggle. At the same time, the Lufeng municipal government sent out a team to investigate the situation.

However, on November 1, the government announced that it would relieve party secretary Xue Chang and vice party secretary Chen Shunyi of their duties, and agree to Chen's resignation from the village committee leadership. The municipal government did not implement democratic elections after that, but appointed the vice-mayor of Donghai township as the new party secretary of Wukan. The problems of land and official corruption raised by the villagers were not properly investigated and addressed. After two months of unresponsiveness and inaction on the government's part, the villagers had no choice but to launch a peaceful protest on November 21.

Villagers call general strike; elected representative dies

After the march on November 21, on December 3, the municipal government unilaterally announced to the press that the issues had already been solved, and that the Wukan "incident" had come to an end. Outraged, more than 13,000 villagers launched a general strike from December 4 and held assemblies and marches. On December 5, villagers protested against the arrival of the undemocratically imposed party secretary.

On December 9, police arrested village representatives Zhuang Liehong, Xue Jinbo, Zhang Jiancheng, Hong Ruichao and Ceng Zhaoliang on criminal charges. Two days later, on the night of December 11, the Lufeng municipal government suddenly announced that the democratically elected representative of Wukan village and vice-president of the Provisional Board of Representatives, Xue Jinbo, had died of a heart attack. Officials stated that external causes of death had been ruled out. This directly contradicts with the recording of Xue and his daughter that has been circulated on the internet. According to Xue's daughter, Xue's entire body was bruised, his hands swollen, his chin and nose caked with blood: clear signs of having been tortured to death.

Police seal off village in siege

In response to Xue's death, on December 12 and 13, the villagers of Wukan organised an assembly to remember him and to voice their anger. They swore to continue the struggle to remove corrupt officials. Currently, roads into Wukan have been sealed off by thousands of security personnel, effectively cutting off Wukan from outside contact and even stopping the village's water and food supplies. As a result, food is becoming increasingly scarce in the village. Earlier, in attempt to enter the village and arrest more democratically elected representatives, police threw gas canisters at protesters and demolished the homemade roadblocks that the villagers had set up to prevent police from besieging the village.

Faced with continued demonstrations, the municipal government has only acknowledged that it would hold a "double designations", that is, to have the village committee's party members attend question sessions at a designated place for a designated duration. Officials also announced the suspension of the two projects coordinated by former party secretary Xue Chang and Hong Kong-based businessperson Chen Wenqing.

Same problem: capitalism

While the villagers of Wukan are fighting a difficult battle, at the same time, teachers in Lufeng city also launched their own demonstrations on December 11 to demand a pay rise. Like the 1922 agrarian movement in Hailufeng, the struggles of the Wukan villagers as well as their political and economic demands have a pioneering significance in the history of Chinese workers' and peasants' fight for democracy. The Hailufeng peasants' movement in the 1920s,

Down with corruption; reclaim our land

the workers' strikes in Hong Kong as well as Shanghai all echo each other in highlighting the economic and political crises that plagued global capitalism and capitalist states.

Today, more than 80 years later, the workers' and peasants' movements in Hailufeng similarly echo the recent labour strikes in Shenzhen, Dongguan, Shanghai and so on. They all shed light on the current political and economic crisis in which wealth and power in society are concentrated in the hands of a few.

"Down with corruption, reclaim our land" is the voice of 1 billion Chinese people. It is also the voice of the millions of Hong Kong people who live under the oppression of property hegemony. The revolutionary tradition that began in Hailufeng has been revived once again. While thousands of police surrounding the village, the government declares the people's democratically formed organisation illegal, refuses to tell the truth regarding Xue Jinbo's death, arrests and jails village representatives and only investigates corruption on the village level.

It is clear that the villagers of Wukan have reached the most difficult and yet critical point of their long and hard-fought struggle.

At this fateful hour, we call on those who push for progress and freedom around the world. We call on the people of China and Hong Kong to give their full support to Wukan's fight for democracy. On December 17, we in Hong Kong will protest!

We demand that the central government:

1. Immediately stop the sealing off of Wukan, and release the arrested village representatives;
2. Return Xue Jinbo's body and release the details and truth behind Xue's death; punish the security personnel in charge of extracting confessions by torturing Xue and make a formal apology and grant compensation to Xue's family;
3. Recognise Wukan's democratically elected Provisional Board of Representatives, allow representatives to participate in investigations and handle the matter in an open, fair and just manner;
4. Reclaim the sold land and return it to the villagers of Wukan;
5. Address the demands of the villagers to curb corruption and implement democratic elections;
6. Investigate land seizures in the country and stop the privatisation of land.

Sign the petition to support these demands (English text below Cantonese on site)

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions...>

<http://www.worldlabour.org/eng/node/506>