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Petition:

We Condemn the Taiwan government for Cracking down on Students And Support the Students' Fight to Make Trade Policies

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- News from around the world -

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Six days after the occupation of the Legislature Yuan on March 18, because of dissatisfaction with the authorities for failing to give a positive response to the students' demand, of "returning the trade deal to the legislature for re-considering", on the night of March 23, hundreds of students occupied the Executive Yuan, and quickly attracted thousands of people in support.

However the Ma Ying-jeou government sent riot police to the site and bloodily cracked down on the peaceful occupation of students and their supporters. In the early hours of March 24, about 5,000 heavily armed riot police surrounded the Executive Yuan, wielding batons and shields, and started to beat the unarmed and peaceful occupants until many bled. In the end the police sent in water cannon, with water mixed with pepper spray, and began to attack the protestors who vowed to stay.

The Taiwanese students' demand for transparency and for passing a bill to monitor trade deals before parliamentary debate is nothing but a very minimum democratic demand. Confronted by an extremely corrupt government and its policies which attack the people's livelihood, the people should not give in an inch.

The anti-service trade deal movement in Taiwan carries a significance which goes far beyond Taiwan. It is the most recent struggle against the so called free trade agreement. Similar struggles were kick started in the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle, continued in 2005 by the anti-WTO ministerial meeting in Hong Kong, and then followed by the Bali anti-WTO actions at the end of 2001. The Taiwan struggle is just one of the shock waves of this global struggle. Although the movement in each region carries its own uniqueness, the common denominator among all these struggles is still the very same theme of the fight against Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and their impact on democracy and people's livelihoods.

Some say that one has to distinguish between good and bad free trade agreements. This is deceitful talk. Over the past 20 years, all free trade agreements, in particular WTO agreements, have been bad for the working people and the environment. Firstly, this so-called free trade regime as propagated by governments and businesses are fundamentally different from what Ricardo envisioned in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century. At that time free trade among nations chiefly covered trade in goods. Even after the second world war the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (the GATT) mainly covered the industrial goods, leaving out agriculture, not to speak of services. Today, however, so-called free trade not only extends to the free flow of capital among nations, it even re-interprets the term "services" to encompass many public social services, such as postal services, education, water supply, etc., so as to turn them into business opportunities for TNCs. This actually allows the TNCs to freely exploit the world's working people and its natural resources, and (when this is done) then the former will just leave with no regard at all to the latter. It is not uncommon for multinational brands, after seriously violating labor rights, to unceremoniously divest. The logic of the so-called free trade is nothing but the logic of "corporate profit should be as high as possible, while wages should be as low as possible", pushed to the extreme.

In order to promote free trade, the WTO seeks to tear down what it calls "trade barriers". But what it means by "trade barriers", are nothing but those domestic laws which protect labor rights and benefits as well as natural resources. In order to achieve its goal, the WTO makes its agreements take precedence over national laws. That is why the WTO and its free trade regime, or ECFA, or TPP, or CEPA, inevitably allow the commercial interests of TNCs to override the protection of labor rights and the environment. The Taiwanese government has accused the students of not respecting democracy. In fact, the moment when governments put the freedom of capital in front of the people, they are overthrowing the democracy of the people.

The TNCs and the governments, acting through free trade agreements, have been promoting privatization, casualization of the labor market, the cutting back of labor rights protection and welfare. The promotion of the free movement of capital around the globe only results in a race to the bottom in terms of labor conditions. That is why, even though when many countries (including Taiwan, mainland China and Hong Kong) enjoy high growth rates, the wage share has still been falling. In fact, China's accession to the WTO only enriched the officials and businessmen, while more than thirty million state workers were sacked.

Government officials and businessmen love to tell people if you do not want to return to autarchy or be marginalized, you must join the regime of free trade and of globalization. Our reply to this is no; instead of joining the race to the bottom, the people around the world should rather struggle to fight to harmonize with the highest standard of labor and environmental protection in the world. We do not want to return to autarchy; rather what we want is a globalization from the bottom.

March 25, 2014

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