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China

Contours of the class struggle in China

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Since the 2008 and the spread of the global economic crisis, China has experienced a sharp rise in class struggle, both in Hong Kong and on the mainland. Ellen David Friedman, a long-time organizer of the National Education Association in Vermont, founding member of the state's Progressive Party and member of the Labor Notes Policy Committee, has been working for the last decade with labor and union activists in Hong Kong and the mainland. She spoke with Ashley Smith about the dynamics and nature of these struggles.

How did you get involved in labor organizing in China?

The immediate cause for my beginning to travel to China, starting around 2002 or 2003, was that my son was studying there. I quickly met people in the labor movement on the mainland and Hong Kong. I began to work with labor scholars, labor lawyers, journalists and people working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and then, increasingly, students. Beginning in the academic year 2005-06, I was able to arrange through colleagues a visiting scholar position at Sun Yat-sen University (SYSU) in Guangzhou.

I have continued to go back every year since then for one term, or about four months. This was the first year that I did not go back. Through teaching labor studies at SYSU, I was able to become acquainted with various parts of the labor movement. I've done a lot of work over the years with some reformers in the trade unions and the labor NGO activists in south China particularly, but also in Beijing.

In one of the most important projects, I've worked with a senior professor in the Political Science Department of Sun Yat-sen University to start an International Labor Research Center in collaboration with University of California Berkeley's Labor Center.

This program is the only one of its kind in China, and it has been incredibly productive and successful over the last few years. It organized a lot of research, academic publication, workshops, seminars, conferences, exchanges between unionists, scholars, students and grassroots activists in China and their counterparts, primarily in the U.S. and Germany, but also from many other countries, including a very promising starting relationship with progressive unionists and scholars in Japan. The government, however, shut it down last November.

One of the things you organized was a tour of the Hong Kong dockworkers. What was the significance of their struggle?

They had an amazingly important strike two years ago. It was important for several reasons. Even though Hong Kong is being reabsorbed by the Chinese central government, at present, there is still a great amount of pluralism and autonomy, and in the labor sector, it means there are three or four major labor federations.

The largest, far and away, is the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (HKFTU), which is identified with, or is supervised by, the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), a pro-Beijing, pro-employer union. The next largest is considered to be the pro-independence, pro-democracy union federation called the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU).

On the docks, there is what we would think of as sort of open shop, with some workers in the HKCTU, but others in HKFTU. The dockers in HKCTU waged a heroic strike. They all work for independent contractors, but the real target

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was Li Ka-shing, who is one of the richest men in the world and an oligarch of great capacity. He owns something like 70 percent of the port berths in Hong Kong and many other ports throughout Asia.

The dockers' strike was also an important political struggle. It drew tremendous support from society, and particularly from students. I became acquainted with some of the leaders of that strike, and I was able to bring them to speak at the 2014 Labor Notes conference in Chicago, and then go on a speaking tour of the West Coast ports sponsored in part by the ILWU, and by other unions and left and progressive organizations.

What's the picture of the broader class struggle in China?

First of all, we have to understand that workers in mainland China do not have their own independent unions; the ACFTU is the single recognized union since the 1949 revolution. The government has prevented independent unions from developing through repression and retaliation, especially since the crushing of the uprising in Tiananmen Square in 1989. The government wanted to stop the development of autonomous workers' federations, which had come into being as part of the democracy movement.

Since then, there have been few attempts at forming independent unions. The closest expression is that in some strikes, workers are including a demand for direct election of their own ACFTU officers at the enterprise level—that is, at the lowest level. This represents an internal challenge to bureaucrats within the government-controlled ACFTU, which performs no functions that we would recognize as part of the class struggle. So the demand for elections is significant assertion of workers trying to make the union fight for them.

This particular demand took an enormous, exponential leap after the auto strike wave of 2010.

These strikes showed how workers understood their chokehold over production. It began with a strike in an auto transmission plant—a wholly owned subsidiary of Honda—in a district called Nanhai. The 2,000 strikers were mostly technical school student interns, with an average age of about 20 to 21. They were familiar with use of the Internet, and did research on Honda and discovered it was a really profitable company. They found that workers doing their jobs in Japan were making 50 times as much as they did.

They also understood how lean production or just-in-time production gave them tremendous power to shut down the auto industry. They realized that if they stopped production in any of the parts plants, they would be able to paralyze the assembly plants. So when they struck in the parts plants, it took just three or four days to shut down four assembly plants and hundreds of parts plants. Honda lost millions and millions of dollars in revenue.

This sparked a wave of strikes in auto parts factories. Nobody knows the real number, but hundreds probably. A kind of infectious demand in those strikes was for direct election. I will say also that one of the most encouraging, important things we've seen is that where workers were able to elect their own leadership, those new leaders have taken seriously, to the degree they can, the task of representing their members.

In those plants with elected leaders, there is something that begins to resemble real collective bargaining going on. This is a contrast to business as usual. In the vast majority of what passes for negotiations in China, the official head of the trade union will get together with the guy from HR and will sign a paper that affirms existing minimums wages and other legal requirements. So workers forcing the beginnings of collective bargaining is a very notable advance.

Strikes in China have been endemic since the mid-1990s and the initial wave of privatization of the state-owned enterprises. The struggles go up and down with various economic micro-factors, but they have been growing pretty

steadily for about the last 20 years among migrant workers with varying demands.

What are the new patterns of class fight back today?

The latest phase is characterized by demands over unpaid wage and social insurance arrears at plants that are shutting down. There are a lot of shutdowns, especially in the Pearl River Delta in the southeast part of China. Some of it is because of economic slowdown since the 2008 crisis. Some of it is government policy to reduce the subsidies that had been established to attract all of this labor-intensive low-end production. They now want to drive that inland. So they're removing subsidies such as tax abatements, water subsidies, energy/utility subsidies, infrastructure, logistics support and so on.

Many small enterprises work at such a narrow profit margin that they really can't sustain themselves. When they shut down and leave, they don't pay proper severance or wages in arrears. Often, workers also learn that their social insurances have not been paid for five or 10 or 15 or 20 years. As a result, workers face sudden unemployment without the wages they're owed and without social insurance to tide them over until they find another job.

These conditions have driven the wave of strikes in the southeast. But it really should be noted that there are strikes everywhere, including inland, in every sector. Teachers, taxi drivers, bus drivers, airline pilots, Walmart workers and bank tellers have struck. There have even been strikes in the People's Liberation Army (PLA). So we're witnessing a broad movement of workers.

How much of the struggle has been in reaction to outsourcing to the rest of Southeast Asia and plant relocation? Has that been a factor at all?

A lot has been made of this in the Western mainstream press. My observation is that that's not the biggest factor. Of course, bosses are using the threat as a whip hand to attempt to keep wages low in China. Some capital is relocating, obviously. But my view of it has always been it will never amount to a tremendously serious threat in China, because China offers a situation for capital that is simply not available elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

This is the case for several reasons. First of all, China has quite a competent authoritarian regime and a highly developed infrastructure. Second, it possesses this vast, almost inexhaustible labor pool, which is better educated and healthier than in the rest of the region. And it's also the region's largest economy.

Amid this strike wave you've described, are workers starting to raise broader questions about social change?

Not much, and I have a few thoughts about that. One is that unlike Western European, North American or Latin American countries, which have all had histories to one degree or another of some democratic process and institutions, this is not really true of Asia, except for the countries that have been occupied, like Korea and Japan. So there's no history to draw on. The impulses in the direction of democracy, I would say, are weak and scattered.

The second is that China has a paternalistic state tradition that devotes a significant portion of surplus to maintenance of social stability and livelihood. This has been the case through various regimes and economic structures for over 2,000 years. So whether under the various emperors, the Maoist period or this bizarre state capitalist mixed economy, the state provides some tiny little cash subsidy or subsidized housing of some form.

It also ensures that there's always work for people. And peasants still nominally have access to their own land. On top of that, it's important to remember that workers and peasants in China are, in the main, poor. That means

people's first concerns are around survival.

These factors combine to dampen the generalization at this point from local struggles to broader social transformation. So you definitely don't see that much in the way of political demands in workers' struggles. When they do show up, it's in social media. People have a great interest in trying to find out what's going on and sharing what's going on. That is a very dynamic part of Chinese society right now. But it's a very basic level of political generalization.

The government is aware of this ferment in social media. It hopes to keep it harmless by ensuring growth and the promise of future improvements in people's standards of living. They're very concerned that economic slowdown could trigger broader complaints about Chinese society and its state. So far they have been successful in muting such a development.

One of the most important struggles that developed recently was the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. What are the roots and the dynamics of this struggle?

The Umbrella Movement has its roots in developments over the last four or five years. Many people date it with the start of the Scholarism Movement, in which high school students started to resist the mainland government's attempt to impose a "national curriculum" in Hong Kong. There have also been many other skirmishes in this battle against absorption.

People have resisted the imposition of the Cantonese language, and of course, they have engaged in ongoing struggles to defend suffrage ever since the handover from the British. So students have grown up among all sorts of political agitation and have had the opportunity to learn about struggles, strategy and tactics.

The second important factor is that the Hong Kong universities, much like in Quebec, have had a long history of being very political. It's a complicated history. Many students were very pro-Communist after 1949. After the revolution, Hong Kong authorities conducted an anti-Communist purge. There was a lot of confusion and disorientation on the left throughout the 1960s and '70s as people tried to figure out what was going on in China during the Cultural Revolution. Then, as the democracy movement started in the 1980s, many Hong Kong student unions supported it. But after Tiananmen, that was really crushed. Since then, the universities became relatively depoliticized.

So the Umbrella Movement is an encouraging and important development. They don't have a lot of activists from the previous generation to help guide them. A good number of those had become lost, confused and disillusioned. But there is a stratum of young academics that have come together in this group called Left 21. They were the main channels of student activism to support the Hong Kong dockworkers.

The issues that fueled the new Umbrella Movement are like Occupy movements elsewhere. Students and young people in general are quite indignant that their elders have not managed society well enough to give them access to both education and a livelihood, and the possibility of housing and being able to support a family. The cost of living is absurd in Hong Kong. They see the tremendous growth of inequality. It's hard to miss in Hong Kong "you are in one of the centers of world capital, and yet people can't afford to buy their own apartments and leave their parents' homes.

The second thing is this issue of suffrage. The third is just that people are very, very worried about being absorbed into the mainland. There is a positive aspect to this concern, but it also has a negative aspect. Some parts of the movement reflect a new form of anti-mainland racism that has developed recently. There were posters appearing in

Hong Kong for months portraying mainlanders as locusts coming to Hong Kong and buying consumer goods, because it is cheaper for wealthy mainlanders to buy consumer goods in Hong Kong. Such racism will open the movement to destructive divisions.

So there is a strong occupation impulse, but the political infrastructure to it is far from stable. In the democracy movement, there all sorts of forces who have varied interests, including big Hong Kong capitalists, who are trying to use the movement as leverage for what they know will eventually be negotiations with big mainland capitalists.

After the occupation was demobilized, the chief executive in Hong Kong and members of their legislative council, took unusual steps to publicly criticize some of the student leaders and call on university administrators to discipline them, to expel them and so on. That was met with a lot of disapproval from society. People think they're going too far.

The leftists in Hong Kong took this movement very seriously. They engaged with a mature, self-conscious and comradely way of supporting, but not trying to preempt the students' to help with the students' thinking, as well as their strategy and tactics. I really admire their work. Many of them seem to me somewhat dismayed now. They're concerned that the legacy of this will be a fairly narrow set of electoral demands, without being able to make the connections to the economic inequities.

What's the significance of the arrest of the feminists in China? Does this represent the beginning of a new movement?

I wouldn't say that there's a feminist movement in the mainland, though there are networks of people trying to raise issues of gender inequality. The detaining of these five feminists is hard to understand—why has the government been willing to risk this global censure?

If anything, there probably is now more of a feminist movement potential as a result of these arrests. There are many young women that are thinking about and grappling with issues, and the government's actions have probably helped to focus and deepen their consciousness.

Are there ways that people on the left in the U.S. can help build solidarity with the workers' movement and the other social movements in China?

Yes, but it's very difficult. For example, if there is a significant strike, or something like the case of the detention of the feminists, it's important to mobilize within our own unions, our own political organizations, our own universities and student groups, and so on to make statements. That should absolutely be done. But the impact is generally muted—the Chinese government doesn't actually seem to care that much.

With labor struggles, the instrumental form of solidarity that we normally think of is quite challenging in the Chinese context. In other countries, it's easier to organize real support. For example, a year and a half ago, there was a strike at a Rio Tinto aluminum smelting facility in northern Quebec. So, people from Vermont went up there, we brought people down here, there were speaking engagements, you had unions donating money—things like that. That cannot be done in China—it just can't. There are important strikes, but no partner on the other side to connect with.

There are opportunities that we should take advantage of. Chinese-American progressives, leftists and scholars have an important role to be play in building intellectual and organizational connections. There are openings for exchanges and visits.

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We hope that, minimally, it accomplishes a broadening of the sense of the inter-penetration of the countries and their economies, creation of relationships, sharing of strategies and tactics that hopefully, when the time comes, can open up spaces and connections for more important forms of solidarity.

Transcription by Rebecca Anshell-Song

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