

Inside China's protests

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A video footage shows a crowd of students at Tsinghua University in Beijing holding up blank pieces of paper and chanting, "Democracy, rule of law, freedom of expression!" Through a loudspeaker, a young woman can be heard in the background shouting: "If because we are afraid of being arrested, we don't speak, I believe our people will be disappointed in us. As a Tsinghua student, I will regret this my entire life!"

"We are holding up blank pieces of paper because it represents everything we want to say but can't due to the censors", Zhao* tells *Red Flag* via encrypted message from the Chinese mainland. He is a 22-year-old Shanghai native who recently graduated from a university in Beijing. Zhao says many young people have lost confidence in COVID zero after a string of tragedies such as the Guizhou bus crash, which killed 27 patients who were being transported to a quarantine facility. Meanwhile, the consolidation of Xi Jinping's rule for a historic third term—combined with widespread youth unemployment and diminishing job prospects for university graduates—is creating disaffected layers of youth in Chinese society.

"This sense of powerlessness and fear makes us feel disheartened about our future", Zhao says. "Many of us say we'll be the 'last generation' [young people in China who choose not to have kids as a form of protest] and choose to 'lie flat' [do the bare minimum], because we don't think that things will get any better. We're unwilling to allow the unborn generation to come into this world and endure the torture of not being free.

"I joined the protests because they were a new and incredible experience for me. It is difficult for us mainlanders to have any first-hand experience of social movements because of state repression ... I stand with all those who are fighting for their freedom: Uyghurs, Tibetans, the people of Hong Kong and Taiwan. I want the entire system to be dismantled and for everyone to be able to speak freely."

Historically, students have been at the forefront of resistance to Communist Party rule. During the 1989 uprising, they played a leading role in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations, which acted as the social detonator for a nationwide strike movement. But after the movement was defeated, university campuses became tightly monitored and increasingly repressive.

From the mid-2000s, a less authoritarian environment led to the emergence of Marxist student groups with some degree of independence from the Communist Party. Student activists connected with networks of labour activists in the Pearl River Delta and involved themselves in labour organising.

This came to an end in 2018, when a failed unionisation drive provoked a crackdown by authorities. University administrations disciplined students and severely restricted the activities of the Marxists. Peking University disbanded its Marxist Studies Society in the name of "reorganisation". In early 2019, the students who protested against disciplinary actions were harassed, beaten and jailed; some even disappeared.

"The protests on campus mark the beginnings of a student movement, especially as some activist students are beginning to distrust the government and school authorities", Ji Hengge,* a Marxist,

tells *Red Flag* from the Chinese mainland. “These demonstrations, which took place at more than 50 university campuses [from 26 to 27 November this year] were the largest since the 1989 uprising. This is still a long way from a large-scale student movement, especially as students are not sufficiently organised at the moment. Their protests are mostly spontaneous, their demands are often not unified, and most students have not even acted yet. But these protests in university can become a model for other students—they have shown that students can fight for their rights through protest.”

The Foxconn iPhone assembly plant in Henan, the provincial capital of Zhengzhou, employs more than 200,000 workers and accounts for 60 percent of the province’s exports. It has been the site of fierce resistance to industrial policies that force workers to live inside the factory.

In late October, information began circulating about COVID infections and deaths inside the factory. Fearing infection and being unable to leave, thousands of workers scaled the factory walls and squeezed between fences to escape to their hometowns. “They always put the quantity of products first and human life comes second. Human life means nothing to them”, remarked Ms Zhang,* one of the workers who escaped, in a Chinese-language interview on WeChat.

In the aftermath, local governments across Zhengzhou initiated a draft to ease Foxconn’s labour shortages. (Apple was counting on Zhengzhou Foxconn to produce its new iPhone 14 in time for the Christmas season.)

In early November, 10,000 new workers from Henan and surrounding provinces arrived at the factory. But the bonus payments the new workers had been promised upon arrival (6,000 yuan, approximately US\$860) were reported to be withheld until March next year. In response, thousands of workers clashed with riot police, breaking through barricades and hurling them at security personnel. Foxconn was forced to compensate each recruit 10,000 yuan and provide free bus rides to workers who wanted to leave the factory and return to their hometowns.

“Foxconn presented in concentrated form what many people have been experiencing inside China”, Eli Friedman, co-editor of *China on Strike: Narratives of Workers’ Resistance*, says via Zoom from the United States. “Since the Shanghai lockdown earlier this year, capital has been allowed to circulate freely while human mobility is reduced to a bare minimum—with workers forced to sleep, eat and work in their places of employment—in an effort to contain the virus while maintaining economic growth. This is a very different situation to the zero COVID policy in Wuhan in 2020, when only the bare essentials of life were operating.”

In this “closed loop” system, responsibility for the workers’ welfare (including COVID measures) is placed on individual firms such as Foxconn. “These corporations have no experience, no capacity and frankly no interest in keeping these workers alive at any decent level of humane subsistence”, says Friedman. “It is easy to see how a situation like this quickly falls apart: rumours start to spread, healthy people are getting sick, co-workers are dying in their dormitories. And so it makes complete sense: workers ran for the exit.”

Friedman points out that any form of coordinated action such as this requires at least some level of organisation. “From the outside it is hard to know exactly what networks were involved. But if you lock up 200,000 mostly young people in a factory and force them to live in dormitories together—it is precisely this type of environment where grievances can be discussed and labour organising can start to happen.”

Jude Howell, in a piece for *Made in China* journal, notes that, from the early 2000s, a more relaxed attitude toward foreign NGOs on the part of the Chinese government led to the creation of

independent labour organisations. These, in turn, helped generate activist networks involved in an upswing of working-class self-activity, which coincided with a boom in export-oriented manufacturing. In 2010, strikes erupted at Foxconn and Honda in Guangdong province, before spreading to Toyota in Tianjin, a city near Beijing in the north-east, and throughout several factories in the south of the country. The strikes won a series of wage increases and improved conditions, spurring on a strike wave in mostly foreign-owned factories until late 2015.

Since then, Xi Jinping's government has been largely successful in eliminating the networks, arresting labour leaders and activists, driving others into hiding, and closing the independent labour organisations. Combined with an economic slowdown and a decline in working-class confidence, the result has been a dramatic decrease in strikes and labour organising in recent years.

The initial impact of the Foxconn uprising is cause for quiet optimism. "The image of migrant workers standing up to big capital and the Chinese state has now entered the national imagination", Friedman says. "Although it has been erased from the mainstream narrative, the Foxconn uprising laid the basis for the riots that would follow in Urumqi and the subsequent demonstrations that erupted on the campuses and in the streets."

A fire in an apartment block in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, in which at least ten people died—widely blamed on COVID restrictions that lock apartment buildings from the outside and prevent access to emergency services—sparked demonstrations across the country that took aim at aspects of the public health measures that many believe are failing to protect lives. The victims of the fire were all Uyghur: the oppressed Muslim-majority ethnic group in Xinjiang. After the fire, riots broke out when thousands of Han majority demonstrators surrounded government buildings and demanded justice for the victims, as well as the relaxation of COVID restrictions to allow greater access to food and essential services.

Demonstrations in solidarity with the victims of the Urumqi fire soon spread to Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, Guangzhou and many other towns and cities in late November—lighting candles, laying white flowers and holding blank pieces of paper over their faces and heads (white is the traditional colour of mourning in China). Many demonstrations evolved into calls to end the lockdowns; some even demanded that the Communist Party and Xi Jinping step down. In Beijing, at least a thousand people gathered along Beijing's third ring road, chanting: "We are all Xinjiang people!"

"Fewer Uyghurs than Han participated in the protests, in large part because the government has been more politically repressive and vindictive towards Uyghurs", Ji Hengge explains. "Although the movement quickly subsided and the subject of Uyghur oppression is not currently on the agenda, the demonstrations showed the potential for Uyghurs and Han Chinese to fight in unity in the face of a common oppressor ... Overall, it was a struggle for unity between the Uyghurs and the Han Chinese."

Outside the mainland, solidarity protests spread to Hong Kong on 27 and 28 November. Students at the University of Hong Kong distributed leaflets relating to the Urumqi fire and held up blank pieces of paper, while small groups of people gathered in the central business district with messages of solidarity for the mainland.

"These people have shown immense courage by gathering again to express their dissatisfaction with the regime", Lam Chi Leung, a socialist, says via email from Hong Kong. "Since the defeat of the 2019 uprising and the passage of the national security law, many people have been too afraid to protest. The mainlanders have given Hong Kong activists some confidence and provided them with a reason to stand up and fight."

Since the 1990s, Hong Kong has been home to groups dedicated to the development inside the Chinese mainland of social movements related to gender equality, human rights, environmental issues and labour solidarity. Most organisations have either ceased operations or significantly reduced their work due to the increased repression.

Small numbers of pro-democracy activists who once held a negative view of mainlanders—due to their indifference (or opposition) to the 2019 uprising and the previous waves of pro-democracy struggles—have changed their attitude and involved themselves in solidarity protests. Others have refused to do so because of the lack of mainland solidarity with Hong Kong in the past.

“I completely disagree with this attitude”, Lam Chi Leung says of those who refuse to offer solidarity. “It serves only to divide the people of Hong Kong from the mainland; it strengthens the CCP regime that oppresses us both. The working class of China and Hong Kong have a common interest in fighting for democracy and social equality in our countries. Only when people in China and Hong Kong unite in common struggle do we have any chance of defeating the CCP.”

Since 1989, the Chinese Communist Party has faced much larger protests than those that took place in recent weeks. But the previous waves of struggle have been mostly localised and have tended to avoid criticising the national government. The narrowing of the field of acceptable dissent under Xi Jinping—primarily through greater repression—created the conditions for the most widespread protests since 1989.

Beijing has now abandoned its commitment to COVID zero and lifted certain public health measures such as lockdowns. Feng Zijian, an adviser on China’s COVID task force, estimates that the resulting surge could infect 60 percent of the country’s 1.4 billion population. New modelling by Wigram Capital Advisors, a macroeconomic advisory group that has provided modelling to governments during the pandemic, published in the *Financial Times* suggests that as many as 1 million people could die in the coming months. The figure might seem improbable, implying as it does a death rate higher than any other country has yet experienced. But even a fraction of such a total would be a public health disaster. In a country such as Australia—which is far better placed and better prepared to deal with the fallout from letting the virus rip—the hospital system remains in crisis and long-COVID has become its own public health disaster, crippling tens if not hundreds of thousands of working-class people.

One question is whether Beijing, in dropping its incredibly punitive lockdowns, will implement public health measures that both protect lives and respect other basic human needs. Such measures would include paying workers to stay at home while ensuring their needs are adequately met, shutting down non-essential industries, implementing strict occupational health and safety measures in essential industries that remain open, dramatically expanding healthcare infrastructure and introducing vaccination mandates using vaccines that are scientifically proven to be the most effective.

Another question is whether those forms of “institutional memory” in the Chinese labour and student movements that Xi Jinping’s regime has effectively destroyed can now be regenerated as the virus widely spreads. Only time will tell. After all, while the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States flourished despite the carnage of the pandemic, in other places, such as Hong Kong, political activity was severely reduced as young people implemented their own public health measures, cautioning against public gatherings that might contribute to a deadly outbreak of the virus, particularly among the elderly.

For a brief moment, the protests against the Chinese state highlighted the potential power of workers and students to challenge the regime. “From the outside, the CCP can appear monolithic,

with Xi cementing total power and control over China for many years to come”, Ji Hengge says. “These [protests] have now completely shattered that illusion—their impact will be felt for many years to come.”

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* Names changed.

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<https://redflag.org.au/article/inside-chinas-protests>