

The Significance of Taiwan's Anti-Service Trade Agreement Movement

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On Thursday, Taiwan's anti service trade agreement movement will leave the Legislative Yuan and the occupation will come to an end. Some of its participants think that the movement has not achieved its aims and do not want to leave. As outsiders it is difficult for us to judge. However, although the objectives of the movement were already set very low [1], which has had the advantage of being able to unite the masses through a common denominator, as long as the government/Wang Jin-pyng was prepared to make minor concessionary gestures it would not be difficult for them to end the occupation. Nevertheless, the movement still has a historical significance. Although it did not set its aims very high, it made use of strong civil disobedience to occupy the Legislative Yuan for 22 days, which is something that the world rarely sees.

Complete reform from the bottom up is better than the other way round

History has always shown that even great top-down reform means only limited social progress, since the ruling elite which unilaterally makes the reform can just as easily unilaterally withdraw it. Conversely, if the reform comes from the bottom-up, yet only makes a very small improvement, it is a progressive achievement of much greater significance. This is something that is true of Taiwan's anti-service trade agreement movement.

While the aims of the movement as a whole were set very low, each of the participants had their own agenda. For the right, the movement was only opposed to Ma Ying-jeou; it was not against the service trade agreement and definitely not anti-free trade. For the left, on the other hand, a few days ago 17 trade unions issued a joint statement opposing free trade. The statement gave the way that free trade agreements help big capital to exploit small businessmen and workers as reason for opposing the service trade agreement. The statement pointed out that, " In recent years, Taiwan's labour movement has also seen protests against the WTO, US pork and beef, the free economic zone and other liberalisation issues...The service trade agreement gives Chinese capital a competitive advantage to enter Taiwan and open up shop. Once there is an overall oversupply of the new capital in the service market, it is bound to lead to another wave of price cuts by vendors trying to survive the cutthroat battle, and labour will once again be sacrificed in the competition." [2]

No free trade agreement does not mean no trade

Some unions have adopted the KMT's position and actively supported the service trade agreement,

which is an argument that is not worth responding to here. There are also some who refer to Marx's support of free trade in the 19th century and use "leftist" rhetoric to defend the agreement. [3] But this needs scrutiny. Is the so called free trade of Marx's era and the so called free trade of today really the same? Ricardo's so called free trade only covers the trade of goods and basically excludes cross border capital flows. Today's free trade, however, covers both categories, allowing multinational companies free access to each country, and moreover the service industry is interpreted so as to include many public social services leading to their privatization. This has resulted in the so called "race to the bottom", in which, in order to compete to attract capital, countries drive down the level of labour rights and natural resources protection. This is why over the last 20 years, whenever countries have signed free trade agreements, social movements have opposed them –although they have not, as some critics have claimed, opposed trade itself because even without these agreements world trade will still be conducted.

The majority of unions, however, at this time do not support the position (outlined above) held by the minority of unions. The majority of the movements' participants take part either due to a simple democratic consciousness and resentment towards the policies of the KMT, or from a simple people's livelihood position as they do not want to be oppressed by large capital, or due to feelings of fear and resistance to Chinese companies taking over Taiwan's market and China's unilateral unification agenda towards Taiwan. These three reasons are often mixed together. As for the position of narrow nationalist hatred (towards Chinese people), it has had a limited impact, although the slogan "Ma Ying-jeou is a Chinese beast" has attracted some attention.

The various trends continuing to ferment

As more and more ordinary people and social organizations, each with their own ideas, have participated in the movement, it might be said that the movement may have exceeded its original aims. Furthermore, Wang Dan, the student leader of the 1989 China democratic movement who has been teaching in Taiwan for many years, has also made an important observation that is worth noting. He said that politics has never normally seen so many interested students actively involved in the movement and all kinds of discussion. If this is combined with the hundreds of thousands of ordinary people that have taken part, what does it mean? It shows that the new generation of civilians are politicized. Imagine if a simple majority of participants were to all take the progressive stance of the 17 trade unions. It would not only mean a big blow to China's attempt to influence Taiwan's economy and its politics through trade agreements, it would also be a big blow to the American government's attempt to lure Taiwan to sign the Trans-Pacific Partnership. This is why the United States has been quick to warn the people of Taiwan not to oppose free trade agreements in principle, and why Wang Jin-pyng has made concessionary gestures to divert the movement towards legislative procedure in order to see its collapse.

Even if now the movement is temporarily at a low tide, it has at least warned the two sides of crony capitalism that they cannot go it alone. It is not a trivial matter. Those holding negative views of the movement cannot see the wood for the trees. The movement has seen various undercurrents emerge after three weeks of confrontation and discussion by the masses on the streets. It is not impossible that this will continue to develop in the future and bring about change to Taiwan's political landscape.

Au Loong yu, April 9th 2014

P.S.

* <http://www.worldlabour.org/eng/node/669>

* Translated by Bai Ruixue.

Footnotes

[1] The movement demanded that the trade agreement be returned to parliamentary debate and that a procedural mechanism to monitor trade deals be set up.

[2] Seventeen Taiwanese Unions' Statement Against the Service Trade Agreement (in Chinese): <http://news.cts.com.tw/nownews/politics/201404/201404051402067.html>

[3] Review and Prospects in the Time of an Ebb of the International Labor Movement and the Crisis of Capitalism (in Chinese): <http://www.cooloud.org.tw/node/77760>