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1989 - China 30 years ago: Beyond 4 June. Tiananmen and the 'May of the Masses'

Wednesday 5 June 2019, by [HORE Charlie](#) (Date first published: 4 June 2019).

Last week we published reflections on the 30th anniversary of China's 'May of the Masses' [see below]. Here Charlie Hore reflects on the massacre of 4 June and its aftermath.



'Since the early 1980s, the Communist Party's greatest fear had been of a Polish-style Solidarity uprising led by organised workers' - A replica of the memorial in the Polish city of Wrocław depicting a destroyed bicycle and a tank track as a symbol of the Tiananmen Square protests. The original was destroyed by Security Service despite the fact that it was after the 1989 elections (via wikipedia)

Thirty years ago today, thick palls of smoke hung over Beijing from burning barricades and army vehicles. After a month of mass protests that had occupied much of the city, the army had entered like an invading force, in what has come to be known and commemorated as the 'Tiananmen Square massacre'.

It's right that we should mark the crushing of the most important mass movement in modern China's history, but that remembrance should encompass the full scale of both the repression and the resistance to it. It wasn't just Tiananmen Square, or even Beijing, and it wasn't just 4 June.

In Beijing, the great majority of those who died were killed as the army broke through barricades in the west of the city, firing on demonstrators and into housing blocks, and in the days after 4 June as resistance continued. It was Beijing's workers, rather than the students in the Square, who bore the brunt of the murderous attack.

Across China, the news of the massacre brought even more people out on the streets than during the May events. In the southern city of Hangzhou, students and others blocked the main railway tracks for most of three days[1]; in nearby Shanghai:

At least 200 articulated electric trolley buses and diesel buses were used to block most of the main roads into the city; with the co-operation of drivers they were parked across streets and their tyres deflated...Huge crowds massed at intersections day and night to listen to students addressing them under red flags.[2]

In the south-western city of Chengdu:

“By nightfall on June 4, angry mobs were setting fire to anything belonging to the state, including buses and police vehicles. The crowds threw stones, tiles and gasoline bottles at a police station near the square where detained protesters had been beaten, and eventually set it on fire.”[3]

Demonstrations, rallies and strikes spread to every major city. According to *The Tiananmen Papers*, between 5 and 10 June there were demonstrations in 181 cities. In north-eastern China, 15,000 car and textile workers walked out in Changchun to join a 100,000 strong demo, while in Shenyang 3,000 aircraft workers joined a memorial meeting of over 30,000.[4]

But in the absence of any co-ordination, the protests quickly tailed off. In most places the authorities simply waited them out, although Amnesty International reported [1] at least 300 civilians killed in Chengdu and an unknown number in the north-western city of Lanzhou.[5] In the repression that followed, hundreds if not thousands of people were shot, often in secret, while up to 30,000 were arrested, many of who would spend years in prison.

The repression hit especially hard against workers who had taken an active part in the movement, most of all those who had tried to organize independent workers' organisations. The biggest of these was the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation (BWAFF), but there were reports of groups in at least 15 other cities[6], as well as other groups in Beijing. Since the early 1980s, the Communist Party's greatest fear had been of a Polish-style Solidarity uprising led by organised workers, and the BWAFF's linking of political and workplace democracy shows why:

“Why do a lot of workers agree with democracy and freedom? ... (I)n the workshop, does what the workers say count, or what the leader says? We later talked about it. In the factory the director is a dictator, what one man says goes. If you view the state through the factory, it's about the same: one-man rule...”[7]

Could it happen again?

There is to this day no good overall history of the movement and its repression, so we still do not know the full reach and extent of the upheaval. And ever since 1989 the Communist Party has done everything in its power to ensure that the memory is excised: social media posts are scanned and deleted for any possible oblique reference to 4 June, Tiananmen, and 1989; activists are rounded up and removed from Beijing in advance of the anniversary [2]; and security around the Square itself is tightened even further.

The 'May of the masses' didn't come out of nowhere, and was about far more than just abstract calls for 'democracy'. From mid-1998 onwards China's economy underwent its worst crisis since the Cultural Revolution, as the first stage of Deng Xiaoping's market reforms produced widespread food shortages and the worst inflation since 1949. Student protests against official corruption provided the spark for millions of workers to join in attacking the government, with many looking back to the 1976 riots that had been pivotal in restoring Deng to power [3].

Thirty years on, the Chinese economy has changed out of all recognition, but runaway economic growth has been accompanied by a huge increase in the gap between rich and poor. As Louisa Lim put it in *The People's Republic of Amnesia*:

“Could a mass movement like Tiananmen happen again? Yes, it could. Rapacious land seizures, widespread official corruption and choking environmental problems are creating pockets of discontent among people who feel that they have little left to lose. As long as these remain localized, the likelihood of a mass movement is diluted. But these dots on the map are expanding in size and frequency.”[8]

Nothing is inevitable - individual strikes, protests and demonstrations can win immediate gains without developing into anti-government protests, as they have almost continuously in the 30 years since the massacre. But their very frequency shows that the roots of revolt have not withered, and that there is a confidence to take on employers and the local state which, given the right circumstances and trigger, could widen into a more general movement against the central state. China's rulers did not see 1976 coming, nor 1989 - but they fear another such explosion, and they are right to do so.

Charlie Hore - 4 June 2019

References

[1] Jonathan Unger (ed.), *The Pro-Democracy Protests in China - Reports from the Provinces* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 1991) pp. 177-81.

[2] Unger (ed.), *Pro-Democracy Protests*, p 197.

[3] Louisa Lim, *The People's Republic of Amnesia - Tiananmen Revisited* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), p. 189.

[4] Andrew J Nathan and Perry Link (eds.), *The Tiananmen Papers* (London, Abacus: 2002) pp. 524, 531.

[5] The report was originally published as a pamphlet *Death in Beijing* (London: Amnesty International, 1989).

[6] Jackie Sheehan, *Chinese Workers - A New History* (London, Routledge: 1998), p. 211.

[7] Andrew G. Walder and Gong Xiaoxia, 'Workers in the Tiananmen Protests: The Politics of the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation', *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* (1993), 29: 18. Thanks to Pete Gillard for the reference.

[8] Lim, *People's Republic of Amnesia*, p. 210.

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May of the Masses: the Tiananmen Square movement 30 years on

While 4 June marks the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, the movement that reached its height in the month before also deserves to be remembered, writes Charlie Hore.

This article was originally published on the 25th anniversary of the May movement.

Thirty years ago, a mass protest movement exploded across China's cities, posing potentially the biggest challenge to China's rulers since 1949. The Tiananmen Square movement, as it came to be

known is now best remembered for the horrific massacre that ended it. On 4 June 1989 troop columns and tanks smashed their way into the heart of Beijing, killing hundreds if not several thousands of protesters. And thousands more died or disappeared in the repression that followed.

It is right to remember them, and mark the day, to remind China's rulers of their crime. But it is equally important to remember what they were fighting for, and the inspiration of the movement at its height.

China in 1989 was very different to China today. The economic reforms pioneered by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s had led to a substantial rise in living standards, most of all in the countryside where the vast majority of China's population still lived. These were accompanied by partial social and political reforms, which dismantled many of the petty controls over everyday life that had been the norm in the Cultural Revolution.

Those new freedoms had led some, particularly young workers and students, to demand much more, and the 1980s was punctuated by a number of student protests and demonstrations. Deng's arrival in power had also been greeted with a short-lived 'Democracy Wall' movement, in which young workers who had been exiled to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution published calls for greater freedoms. Both were to be important influences in 1989.

But more important was the changing economic climate. Gains of the early 1980s were threatened by inflation and job insecurity. The return of free markets meant that, when food supplies were disrupted, prices could rise very fast. By the start of 1989 urban inflation was higher than at any time since 1949.

Over-heating in the economy, and a consequent austerity drive, also meant large numbers of factories shut or laid off workers. The economic disruption led to semi-public arguments among China's rulers.

This was a crisis of economic policy, driven by unbalanced growth rather than slump, but it was still the worst crisis since 1949. Workers who had seen their lives improving now faced losing what they had won, and a weak and divided ruling class. The scene was set for an eruption, but no-one expected the size and scale of what happened.

How it began

The 1989 movement started with the death of leading politician Hu Yaobang, who had been one of Deng Xiaoping's lieutenants, and was seen as responsible for many of the political reforms. While it began as a movement to honour his memory, it quickly developed into an attack on other politicians, and on official corruption in general, as well as calling for greater political and social freedoms.

It exploded far beyond the size of any previous protest. On the day of Hu's funeral, 150,000 students and supporters occupied Tiananmen Square despite the government trying to ban them. The following weekend there were solidarity marches in at least eight cities, with serious rioting in two.

The CCP attacked the students as 'counter-revolutionary', which only deepened the anger. The movement's leaders sent students into the streets and workplaces to call on workers and citizens to join them.

The response was magnificent. On Thursday 28 April some 150,000 people marched across Beijing, with workers making up half of the march. The march ended with calls for nationwide demonstrations on 4 May, the 70th anniversary of an anti-imperialist student movement that had kick-started the nationalism movement of the 1920s, out of which the CCP had been born.

4 May marked another step forward for the movement, with demonstrations in cities where nothing had previously happened, although in other cities numbers were smaller than before. More importantly, after 4 May, the initiative passed back to the government, with the movement's leaders having no real idea of the next step.

That changed decisively with the launch of a student hunger-strike in Tiananmen Square on 13 May. It began with just 200 students, but within days there were over 1,000, with thousands more sympathisers joining the camp.

The timing was brilliant - the Russian President Gorbachev was just about to make the first visit of a Russian leader to China since the Sino-Soviet split of 1962. This was meant to be a major diplomatic coup for Deng, with the two leaders appearing together in Tiananmen Square in front of cheering crowds. The students had ruined it.

The day Gorbachev arrived, there were half a million people in the square. The following day, a million, with workers marching into the square in organised groups from workplaces. The next day, two million. In at least four other cities, students organised sympathy hunger strikes, with 30,000 people camped out in central Shanghai alone. There were protest and sympathy marches in dozens of other cities across China.

Just as the movement was reaching new heights, a pan-Muslim movement broke out in western China, which saw the biggest ever religious protests in China. The demonstrations were over the publication of an Islamophobic book, and drew together Muslims of different nationalities across at least five provinces as well as in Beijing and Shanghai.

The government reacted very quickly, banning the book and organising mass burnings of it. The two movements were separate, but the government's swift response showed how fearful they were of any widening of out of the protests.

18 May saw one final attempt to defuse the protests, with a televised meeting between government ministers and the student leaders. The ministers patronised the students, and the students in turn humiliated them. The following day martial law was declared, troops began to move into Beijing, and the city erupted.

Martial law

The People's Liberation Army had entered Beijing in early 1949 as liberators. 40 years on, the idea that they would repress the protests was unthinkable. Disbelief turned to rage, and workers across the city formed barricades on all the main roads, with numbers of workplaces deserted and the subway lines shut down by workers.

Within two days a British eyewitness could write:

"Saturday night was the most amazing human spectacle I have ever seen. It was unreal, the amount of people who came out onto the streets. There was everybody there: the very old, sitting families with young children; babies carried in mothers' arms; everybody was there to stop the soldiers. They thought the crunch was coming that night and they were fully prepared to try and stop them. An old man said that there were more people on the streets than he had ever seen in his life - certainly more than in 1949."

And the following day two other eyewitnesses wrote for Socialist Worker:

"For 48 hours now the city has been entirely in the hands of the people. Though the atmosphere is

tense, there is no drunkenness, no looting and no violence...We are on the main road in the east of the city The avenue is wide. Three articulated buses span it. Behind this for over 1,000 metres there must be over 100 buses arranged in intricate patterns blocking the road...

“The barricade won’t, and isn’t meant to, stop tanks. The idea is to halt and slow up moving troops to allow people to argue with the soldiers and turn them back, as has happened so often in the last couple of days. The barricades are to stand in front of, not behind...”

“All of the city centre, maybe six miles wide and six miles deep or maybe more, is now under the control of workers and students. People talk of five million people, over half the entire population, out on the streets yesterday. Most of them are workers. Everywhere open-topped trucks packed with workers and students are passing...And everyone sings the Internationale over, over and over.”

It looked like a revolution, and for many people it felt like a revolution. On the barricades, and in the square itself, women came to the fore as organisers and leaders, in stark contrast to everyday life. One eyewitness estimated the crowds were 40 percent female, adding that she had never felt so safe as a woman in her life. There was a huge sense of liberation and of comradeship, with the police and the state seemingly completely absent.

But, while there was a general sense of rebellion, there was little sense of alternative. The students’ formal demands never went beyond replacing a few ministers, reversing the ‘counter-revolutionary’ judgement made in April, and an end to corruption at the top. And while the student leadership was capable of amazing organising feats, it had a very top-down structure that made little or no attempt to organise wider democratic bodies.

The Workers’ Autonomous Unions that were organised in Beijing and a number of other cities in late May were a response to this, and an attempt to build a distinctively working-class pole of attraction inside the movement. In Beijing some ten thousand people joined, though workplace organising was hampered as many people simply weren’t going to work. In most other cities, however, they simply didn’t have the time to move beyond being small groups of activists.

In the absence of any forward perspective, and with the troops backing off, the numbers on the barricades and in the square gradually shrank. In other cities there were still huge mobilisations, but they were looking to Beijing for leadership, and none came.

The massacre and its impact

There was a half-hearted attempt to send troops into Beijing during the day on 3 June, which quickly broke down, and brought massive numbers back onto the streets. They were to be no match, however, for the full scale invasion that night.

From around 10pm on 3 June tanks, armoured cars and troop carriers burst through the barricades in western Beijing, firing at random into the crowds that came out to oppose them. They moved slowly through the city towards Tiananmen Square, arriving there in the early hours of 4 June. By daybreak there were still huge crowds on the streets protesting, and numerous burnt-out tanks and troop carriers showed the extent of the resistance.

There were credible reports of large numbers of troops simply deserting, and several reports of army units attacking other units suspected of desertion. Away from the main streets, there were numerous cases of troops getting isolated and attacked by workers. But the fight-back was unorganised, and could do no more than make the invasion a costly one for the army.

Across China sympathy demonstrations exploded in what was probably the biggest mobilisation to

date. Huge crowds occupied city centres, called for general strikes, and fought the police and the army. Two nights of street fighting in the southwestern city of Chengdu led to almost 300 deaths. Over 180 towns and cities saw disturbances serious enough to report to Beijing. And in Hong Kong a million people, one in six of the population, marched in protest.

The repression that followed was vicious, with 30,000 people arrested by the end of the year, and several thousands killed, often in public executions. The repression came down hardest on workers and other city-dwellers who had fought back. But it was not absolute. The government issued a list of 21 most wanted student leaders, seven of whom were smuggled out of China. Leaders of the Beijing Autonomous Workers Union managed to go on the run for several weeks before being caught.

The economic fallout was also serious, deepening the crisis that had begun at the start of the year. Between the middle of 1989 and the middle of 1990 the Chinese economy shrank slightly, the worst result since the late 1960s.

But for China's rulers, this was a price worth paying. What was potentially the most serious challenge to their power since 1949 had to be crushed at any cost. And 25 years later the memory still resonates. When the villagers of Wukan, in Guangdong province, took over the village in late 2011 in response to the murder of a protest movement leader, they spoke to Western journalists about 1989 and how it showed that the central government cannot be beaten.

But the memory has not driven all protest off the streets. In the last 25 years China's economy has expanded faster than at any time in history, and so too has social protest. In the mid-1990s there were mass peasant movements across central China against local authorities imposing illegal taxes. They were, to some extent, pushing at an open door, as the central government also wanted the taxes stopped, but the sheer scale of the movement forced the general government to crack down harder than they wanted to. A few years later, there were near-insurrectionary strikes by workers in state-owned companies against being denied the benefits they were promised after the companies closed. They also won - the central government took over the debts and paid out.

Migrant workers, who flooded into exporting factories from the countryside as China's economy boomed, have also fought back continuously against the conditions they live and work in. Their struggle are even more diffuse and disparate, but two decades of refusing to accept everything thrown at them have won some residence rights in the cities they have moved to - and the right to strike itself.

The government has been forced to allow spaces for mass unrest, and to move further and further back the limits of what is allowed. This does to some extent work as a safety-valve - because people can 'bargain by rioting', and win some gains in doing so, they target local officials and managers rather than the central government. But it is an inherently unstable situation for two reasons: firstly, it works because those who protest win things in doing so, but that also stimulates further protests; and secondly, there are no guarantees about particular struggles not generalising.

1989 was an awful defeat, which has in many ways shaped Chinese society and social movements ever since. The university campuses were silenced, and have stayed quiet ever since. But every year, as the anniversary gets nearer, the government steps up security around Tiananmen Square, arrests journalists and intellectuals and increases the numbers of police on the streets. They know full well that while they managed to drown the movement in blood, they didn't win legitimacy by doing so. The economic boom of the last 25 years has widened the gap between rich and poor, and led to massive corruption at all levels of the CCP and the state, corruption which is now much more visible than it was 25 years ago. The potential for another movement of the size and scale of 1989 has not

gone away, and that is what frightens them.

If 4 June 1989 showed how vicious a ruling class can be in hanging on to their power, the 'May of the masses' showed the potential power of China's workers to challenge them. That is the history we should reclaim and celebrate - despite the defeat, that potential power remains.

Charlie Hore - 29 May 2014

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<https://www.rs21.org.uk/2019/05/31/may-of-the-masses-the-tiananmen-square-movement-30-years-on/>

<https://www.rs21.org.uk/2014/05/29/the-may-of-the-masses-the-tiananmen-square-movement-25-years-on/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/200000/asa170091990en.pdf>

[2] ESSF (article 49146), [1989 Tiananmen Square protests anniversary: crackdown intensifies as 30th anniversary nears](#).

[3] ESSF (article 49147), [40 years ago - Remembering the riots of spring 1976 in China](#).