

# Conditions of the Working Classes in China

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## Introduction

This article is based primarily on a series of meetings with workers, peasants, organizers, and leftist activists that I participated in during the summer of 2004, together with Alex Day and another student of Chinese affairs. It is part of a longer paper that is being published as a special report by the Oakland Institute. The meetings took place mainly in and around Beijing, as well as in Jilin province in the northeast, and in the cities of Zhengzhou and Kaifeng in the central province of Henan. What we heard reveals in stark fashion the effects of the massive transformations that have occurred in the three decades following the death of Mao Zedong, with the dismantling of the revolutionary socialist policies carried out under his leadership, and a return to the “capitalist road,” leaving the working classes in an increasingly precarious position. A rapidly widening polarization—in a society that was among the most egalitarian—is occurring between extremes of wealth at the top and growing ranks of workers and peasants at the bottom whose conditions of life are daily worsening. Exemplifying this, the 2006 Fortune list of global billionaires includes seven in mainland China and one in Hong Kong. Though their holdings are small compared to those in the United States and elsewhere, they represent the emergence of a full-blown Chinese capitalism. Rampant corruption unites party and state authorities and enterprise managers with the new private entrepreneurs in a web of alliances that are enriching a burgeoning capitalist class, while the working classes are exploited in ways that have not been seen for over half a century.

The workers with whom we talked were some of the tens of millions who have been thrown out of their former jobs in the state-owned enterprises, once the pillars of the economy, with the loss of virtually all of the related forms of social security that were part of their work units: housing, education, health care, and pensions, among others. As these state-owned enterprises have been converted into profit-driven corporations, whether by being sold outright to private investors or semi-privatized by managers and state and party authorities, corruption has been common.

The peasants we met with were struggling to deal with the long-term effects of the enforced dissolution of the rural communes and the introduction of the family responsibility system, in which each household contracts with the village for a portion of land to farm. With the throwing open of the country to the global marketplace, the sale of lands by local officials to developers without adequate compensation to the villagers, and rampant environmental devastation of the rural areas, this policy has left hundreds of millions struggling to find a viable way to earn a living, while stripping them of the collective social supports that they had previously enjoyed. Over 100 million of them have become part of the massive migration to the cities, seeking work in construction, the new export oriented factories, or the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs, where they lack even the most basic rights. For many migrants, conditions are deteriorating rapidly as they settle semi-permanently in the urban communities and as they age and health problems mount.

The Chinese working classes have not been passive in the face of their deteriorating conditions and the loss of rights won over decades through struggle and sacrifice in the socialist revolution. Class conflict and social turmoil have surged to levels not seen for decades. The workers, peasants, and migrants in China today are mounting some of the largest demonstrations anywhere in the world, at times involving tens of thousands and resulting in violent clashes with the authorities. Even the minister for public security published figures admitting that “mass incidents, or demonstrations and riots,” rose to 74,000 in 2004, up from just 10,000 a decade ago, and 58,000 in 2003 (*New York Times*, August 24, 2005). The threat of growing social instability represents a deepening challenge to the top party and state leaders, and it has already resulted in policy changes in their attempt to head off ever greater turmoil. Even the so-called new middle class of professionals and managers and the rapidly expanding ranks of college graduates, many of whom have flourished in the decades-long economic boom, is fragmenting. The rising cost of education, which under Mao was virtually free through graduate school, is becoming prohibitive, especially for the working classes. Those who have recently graduated are having increasing difficulty finding jobs. The stress of the market takes its toll even on those who are better off. The gains that economic development has brought—especially wider access to consumer goods and foods and increased mobility and job opportunities—are being undercut for millions by the ever-widening class divide and growing insecurity. As a result, China is entering a period of sharpening class struggle and political uncertainty that will not be easily resolved. The path forward for the working classes will be very difficult, and the revival of the left, though highly significant, is still at a very early stage. This essay explores these complexities and possibilities. I have generally omitted the names of individuals and organizations for their protection.

## **Conflict and Unity**

On the surface, at least, it would seem that the converging conditions of urban workers, migrants, and peasants—and even many members of the new middle class—would provide the basis for a broad unity of struggle against those who are exploiting them under the capitalist market reforms and the opening up of China to global economic forces. But as in similar situations in the United States and elsewhere around the world, the unification of the working classes is more easily conceived in theory than realized in practice. Old prejudices, especially the low esteem in which many urban Chinese hold the peasantry, die hard, compounded by new forms of competition brought about by the massive migration from rural areas to the cities, and manipulation by those in power, who use the tried-and-true methods of divide and conquer to set each group against the others.

As an example, when asked whether Beijing workers feel that migrants are taking their jobs, one activist we spoke with answered, “Yes, especially among those who are laid off, there is some such feeling.” Many of them look down on the migrant population. During the cleanup from a major storm, some urban workers remarked, “That is the kind of work the migrants are here to do, they never see any money at home.” As if to confirm this image, the *New York Times* (April 3, 2006) reported on migrant scavengers in the Shanghai municipal dump, one of whom was working to pay the 10,000 yuan (\$1,250) middle school fees for one daughter, and 1,000 yuan (\$125) for the primary education of a second. The feelings, however, are mutual. Migrants, in their turn, say similar things, such as, “That one deserves to be a laid off worker.”

In a pattern all too familiar from the United States—where race and ethnicity as well as immigrant status enter into the mix—government attempts to help migrants get back pay and the other rights they deserve are seen by some workers as favoritism. The media plays on these divisions and promotes bad relations among the different groups, saying that urban proletarians just want to take jobs with foreigners, while claiming that migrants are willing to work for “nothing,” and trying to get

laid off workers to imitate them, leading to resentment. It is, however, the growing gap between urban and rural incomes—now 3.3 to 1, “higher than similar measures in the United States and one of the world’s highest”—that provides the fuel for such manipulation (*New York Times*, April 12, 2006).

The sharpness of these divisions was made evident by the experience of workers in a Zhengzhou electrical transmission equipment factory, where major clashes occurred in 2001. There, as the enterprise was being sold off and broken up, the police arrested protesters at night, and they broke in and took away machinery like thieves. They also brought in peasants at fifty yuan a day to haul out the equipment. This resulted in a long struggle. In part to avoid the public reaction to the city using police to do its dirty work, peasants were hired as thugs; wearing helmets, they used weapons to beat the workers. Some thirty trucks with five hundred peasant scabs were brought in, an example of what happened all over Zhengzhou. One activist related that when workers in the factory rang a bell, “everyone came out,” leading to a four-hour battle of peasants versus workers on July 24, 2001. The latter won that day, as workers from other factories turned out to help—as many as 40,000 altogether. Though eight workers were arrested and accused of destroying property, they also had legal help and the capitalists lost again. As one worker put it, referring to the rights they had in the pre-reform era, “our laws, Mao’s laws” were upheld. “There were so many people that the government was afraid.”

The size of the people’s action gave the authorities pause, but under pressure from the capitalists the workers were arrested again, this time by public security police to bypass the courts, and there was a ten-day fight with the peasants. In this way, they used peasant enforcers to push the workers out of the factory, and sold off everything right away, dismissing 5,600 people. Then they tore the buildings down, including worker housing, and gave the land to a private developer, who built a store and upscale homes. Now, without work or housing, everyone is afraid to continue struggling. The police at times become goons themselves, taking off their uniforms and acting more like a gang that is protecting the capitalist owners, even using knives. At a pottery plant a mob almost beat a leader of the workers to death, but the authorities let it happen and ignored complaints afterward.

In this way, police and other government agencies not only directly attack and repress those who work in the state-owned enterprises, but pit the various segments of the working classes against each other. Despite the need for unity, such experiences make it very difficult to overcome the already existing prejudices and divisions. As one worker activist from the electrical equipment company said, “Peasants and workers should be one family—we had to fight them, but we should work together.” Those on the opposing sides act in their short-term interests. At the plant, even the head of the police said he did not want to do what he did, but he was under pressure. One worker said to him that “He is just like a dog.” He answered, “Yes, but if I do not bite you now, they will skin me.” The replacement of state-owned enterprises with privatized development compounds the divisions. What new factories are being built in the region mostly get their workers from the countryside, paying very low wages and providing no housing or benefits. Moreover, as one worker put it, unlike the United States, those who are laid off from the state-owned enterprises in China cannot even get service jobs, as it is peasants who are used for that, since they are cheap and easy to control. Despite a desire to work together, therefore, such conditions lead inevitably to resentment between segments of the working classes.

In spite of such divisions and conflicts, efforts are expanding to bring about a higher level of unity among wider segments of the urban workers and to build closer ties between them and the peasants, both those who remain on the farms and those who migrate to the cities. The demonstrations around Zhengzhou paper, textile, and electrical transmission equipment plants, and a 1997 strike of 13,000 taxi drivers in that city, show that tens of thousands of workers in many enterprises and sectors, as well as community members, have turned out in support of those opposing privatization, the loss of

jobs and benefits, or higher taxes and fees. Nevertheless, the more common pattern throughout China is for those working at individual factories to have to confront their employers and the government officials associated with them on their own. Frequently, these confrontations—which may include such actions as laying down on railroad tracks and blocking highways, or surrounding and occupying offices, and otherwise shutting down business as usual for the city—end with small onetime payments to the affected workers, by no means sufficient to provide them any long-term support, but enough to pacify their immediate demand for some kind of relief. In an attempt to get beyond this relatively isolated form of struggle, which has in most cases proved inadequate to halt the overall march of privatization, unemployment, and lost services and securities, workers from the different enterprises in Zhengzhou are beginning to link up. In Kaifeng too—where most state-owned enterprises have closed, leaving 100,000 jobless—workers have expressed the need for greater unity in order to succeed. Only recently, those from the different plants—including the many who have already lost their jobs and the few who are still currently employed—have started to get together, holding meetings with representatives from each of the enterprises, and organizing joint protests drawing participants from all of them. The activists we talked with there were planning a big demonstration of workers from all the factories in the city for later in the year.

But prospects for such united action are uncertain. There are many remaining divisions within the urban proletariat—economic, generational, and even political—with some more supportive of the “reforms” and the government and others holding to the socialist perspective. Even a Zhengzhou park in the middle of a working-class district that we visited is divided physically between right and left groupings of workers and retirees, with the former dominating certain areas, especially during the daylight hours, and the latter more prevalent in other parts, particularly at night. As we experienced when we briefly stopped to talk with some of the many who go there every day for relaxation, debates can get quite heated, and even vaguely threatening, at times. It is similar for the prospects of unity between the workers and peasants, with the migrants playing a kind of in-between role. There is a desire to get together, but differences in both their conditions and their treatment by the government work against such higher levels of unification.

Under the reforms, there has also been a partial reversal of fortunes. In both the cities and in the countryside, those we talked with stated that today, in a sharp contrast to the situation during the socialist era under Mao, some peasants are actually better off than many of the urban workers. They may still be poor and struggling for survival—the most impoverished peasant families remain the worst off of all—but at least they have a plot of land on which they can grow some food. Even the poorest migrant can return to a village if things get too hard in the city. For unskilled urban workers, however, especially those who have been dismissed, there is truly nothing to lose—they have been reduced once again to the classic proletarian condition, devoid of all access to the means of production, and literally left to starve without some kind of outside support. If they have an ill parent, or even a child for whom school fees have to be paid, their situation can be quite desperate. Only those with more skills or who are able to start some kind of small business are more equal in circumstances to the peasants with their land.

As a result, unity in the actions of these two classes is also difficult to achieve. Frequently, protests and demonstrations occur almost simultaneously in both the cities and surrounding countryside. We heard of such parallel events in and around Zhengzhou and Kaifeng even during the short time we were there. In the latter city, twenty workers had just been arrested at one factory, while peasants were protesting the same day in the next county—rising up and doing “bad activities,” as one worker put it—where they damaged government buildings and blocked highways because they had been cheated on land for a road. But there was no link between these virtually simultaneous events, and there had been no joint worker and peasant protests yet.

Moreover, there are differences even in the forms of the state reaction to demonstrations by these

two classes. City workers face a particularly strong repression by the local authorities, because their struggles are more visible to the public, disruptive of the urban seats of power, and directly challenging of the very heart of the reforms—the privatizing of enterprises and the formation of the new capitalist class. As one worker put it, he and those like him are very angry, and they “need to get together, and ‘rebel’—but unlike America they are not supposed to even say anything about their situation.” Still, they are “not afraid to die, since they have nothing”—and so they will keep on struggling.

Large-scale labor actions are growing around the country, at times winning local victories, but often ending with arrest and imprisonment of the leaders. In contrast, while on paper at least, the improvement of rural conditions is now official government policy, the crushing of peasant protests can be even more brutal, because they are largely invisible, unless the actions are on a large enough scale to receive public notice—such as the killing of some twenty villagers in Dongzhou, in Guangdong province, in December 2005, for protesting against inadequate compensation for land taken for a power plant. In spite of these divisions and barriers, there is a feeling that the working classes in the cities and the countryside may find ways soon to link up, as peasants become increasingly angry, and their conditions converge with those of urban workers, and as migrants age and face a deteriorating situation. Activists helping organize all the working classes are trying to bring about the move toward unification, but it is a long and difficult process, that has only begun to bridge the gap between them.

## **The Return of the Left**

The possibility of such higher levels of unity is favored by the presence among peasants, migrants, and the urban working class of those with deep experience in the struggle for socialism in China and knowledge of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. This historical legacy has fundamental significance for the revival of the Chinese left today. As one former Red Guard in Zhengzhou put it, the understanding of a “two-line struggle,” a clear demarcation between the socialism of the revolution and the capitalism of the present, is now coming out primarily from the working classes themselves, and not mainly from the intellectuals. It takes an anticorruption form, in particular—not only in the narrow sense of opposing financial malfeasance and bribes, though that is part of it, but as a broader attempt to block the alliance of state and party officials, managers, and entrepreneurs from completely converting the means of production into the private property of the newly emergent capitalists and reversing the socialist gains made by the workers and peasants in the revolutionary era. The theory, spirit, and practice of the revolution are kept alive by activists, notably in Zhengzhou and other areas, which were centers of the Communist movement going all the way back to the early 1920s. In that city, a double pagoda-like tower built in 1971 looms over the main downtown intersection to commemorate the more than a hundred workers killed in a Communist-led general strike on the Beijing-Hankou railway in 1923 that was savagely put down by the regional warlord. The legacy of the Mao era is also kept alive there today, and the level of worker consciousness is very high, leading to the two-line struggle.

Among the more striking aspects that emerged from discussions with the workers in that city was the sense of entitlement that they felt in the factories where they used to work. Whatever the limits to the social ownership and participatory rights that the working class had in the state-owned enterprises—and which proved inadequate as safeguards against the Dengist reform expropriations—there is no question that they felt strongly that these plants were in some basic sense “theirs.” As one explained it, the electrical transmission equipment factory was “built by the sweat of workers,” and they did not want it taken by capitalists and privatized. It belonged to the whole nation and was part of the collective economic accumulation of the entire working class.

Under Mao, the workers also had some control over the factories, they “could put in ideas and be listened to.” This reached its height during the Cultural Revolution. Then “they were the leaders, the working class represented itself at that time”—but now no one listens, and they have no power. Over and over again, these workers expressed their sense of lost entitlement as a result of the effective theft of their collective property, built up over a lifetime of labor, and their disenfranchisement from all of the participatory rights that they previously exercised. Putting these understandings in a more theoretical context, one Zhengzhou worker explained that the current system of “bureaucratic capital” is a political problem, not basically one of the economy—an analysis that could have come straight out of Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?* “It looks economic on the surface, but it is really a struggle between capitalism and socialism,” primarily a question of politics. China, he said, is “not like the United States, where they never had socialism. Older workers understand this historical context. Most went through the Mao era and the Cultural Revolution. They experienced Mao Zedong Thought, and their generation wants to bring China back to ‘Mao’s road.’ It is part of the international struggle to protect the socialist path.”

This worker would like the struggle of the Chinese working class, and why it is important for it to return again to the road to socialism, to be better understood in the West. It is a long struggle. He hopes workers in China will slowly move back to this path, in which case they should eventually win. But he also warned that if the current movement does not reach a higher level soon, younger workers will see it only as an economic struggle for “better conditions.” That is the legacy of the anti-socialist reform period, and the sayings of Deng Xiaoping—such as “to get rich is glorious.” These are ruining the understanding of the younger workers. “Most of them are afraid to even meet and discuss like this”—we heard these sentiments expressed more than once by the older workers.

It is in part for this reason that those who are still dedicated to the struggle for socialism have found other ways to pass along their consciousness and experience, using cultural forms, and not just political and economic ones, to keep alive the legacy of the revolution and transfer it to new generations. In a corner of a park that we visited in the middle of a working-class district in Zhengzhou, workers and their family members get together each night to sing the old revolutionary songs. On the weekday evening that we were there, a hundred or more—from older retirees to teenagers and even young children—took part in the very spirited singing, accompanied by a group of musicians, and led by a dynamic conductor. We were told that on weekends, “many times more” are often present, up to a thousand or so. As one of the workers who took us to the park put it, “The political meaning of this singing is to show our opposition to the Communist Party—what it has become—and to use Mao to confront it and to raise consciousness.”

This same historic spirit pervades the practical struggles in the city as well. When the paper mill strike began in 2000—still the “model” for resistance to privatization in this area—workers used “Cultural Revolution” methods, according to one activist, in forcing out the managers, seizing the factory, preventing the removal of equipment, and instituting worker control. After many twists and turns, part of the plant still remains in the hands of the workers, but it is struggling to survive not only in the market economy, but in the face of official attempts to undermine it economically. As their leader explained, after having been jailed, they had adopted this specific form of struggle “because the principles of the Paris Commune will live forever.” A similar leftist historical perspective was seen in the electrical equipment plant struggle, where one of their slogans was, “Workers want to produce and live,” but they also put up a banner saying, “Continually uphold Mao Zedong Thought.” Other actions by the workers take an even more overtly political form.

The same year as the paper mill seizure, a celebration of the anniversary of the death of Mao began. In 2001 this gathering had tens of thousands of workers—with 10,000 police surrounding them—and there was a big strike and confrontation. Today, workers are prohibited from even going to the small square where the last Mao statue in the city still stands, on either his birth or death dates. But they

go anyway and confront the police. It was there, on September 9, 2004, that a worker activist, Zhang Zhengyao, passed out a leaflet charging the Communist Party and government with deserting the interests of the working classes and taking part in widespread corruption. His flyer also denounced the restoration of capitalism in China and called for a return to the “socialist road” taken by Mao. Both he and the coauthor of the leaflet, Zhang Ruquan, were arrested after police raided their apartments. Their case soon became a cause célèbre in China, with many leftists from all over the country traveling to Zhengzhou to protest outside the closed trial of the two in December 2004, when they were each sentenced to three years in prison. Together with Ge Liying and Wang Zhanqing—who assisted in the writing and printing of the leaflet, and who have also been harassed by the police—these worker activists have come to be known as the “Zhengzhou 4.”

A petition letter, initiated in the United States, to President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, calling for their release, attracted over two hundred signatures—about one half each from inside and outside China. This was an unprecedented show of support for leftist workers, especially given the potential risk for those who signed it, uniting Chinese intellectuals and activists with their international peers. Though the government did not respond directly to the letter, Zhang Ruquan was later released from prison, ostensibly for health reasons, which some activists believe was at least partially a result of the pressure generated by the petition and other related solidarity activities, such as the posting of sometimes extensive information and analysis regarding their case on left Web sites.

The Zhengzhou 4 represent the refusal of workers in China to passively accept the new conditions imposed on them by the party and state, the persistence of leftist ideology and activism in their ranks, and the growing support that they are gathering from others throughout the society and even abroad. But this case also brought out the divisions as well as the renewed strength of the Chinese left. It was mainly the younger leftists who took the lead in signing the Zhengzhou 4 petition letter, using the Internet to circulate it widely, while criticizing those among their elders and mentors who, at least at first, had held back. For the young generation, solidarity with workers who were taking a public stand on the left took precedence over concern with having the exactly correct line. For the older leftists, past divisions and struggles over ideology and policy often block unity for common action. In their case, it is harder to lay aside historical conflicts in order to face the new conditions of the present.

These differing attitudes reflect a widely accepted analysis of the three main groupings found among Chinese leftists: (1) the “old” left which is made up largely of those who rose through the ranks of the party and state and who, after in many cases initially embracing at least parts of the Deng Xiaoping reforms, moved to opposition when the capitalistic nature of those policies became increasingly apparent; (2) “Maoists” who have remained steadfast in their support for the programs of the revolutionary era of Chinese socialism under Mao, and have their popular base primarily among the workers and peasants; and, (3) the “new” left which, like its counterpart in the West—especially during the 1960s—tends to be composed of the younger generation, mainly centered in the universities and new NGOs, who are open to a wide range of Marxist, as well as broadly sociological and social democratic trends, but who are also often more willing to align themselves with the followers of Mao than are those among the “old” left. The lines between these three groups, however, are by no means either rigid or mutually exclusive. “Old” leftists can be found throughout society, both inside and outside of government, while many “Maoists” and even some in the “new” left work within the party and state. Any parallels with similar leftist categorizations—especially the “new” left—in the West should also not be overdrawn, as they each have their own specific Chinese characteristics that reflect the history of the struggle there. In 2001, a highly unusual meeting of four different political tendencies—organized by a former Red Guard leader in Zhengzhou who was imprisoned for many years after the reforms began, and is still an



activist—was held at Beidaihe, the seaside town where the top leadership gathers each summer to plan strategy. While they agreed to disagree on whether to oppose all of the reform policies, they were united in criticizing Deng Xiaoping for the extent of the recapitalization that he had introduced.

More recently, a forum of very high cadre from several prominent institutes, universities, and agencies met to develop a Marxist analysis of the current situation—with the president of Beijing University introducing the session. The hope was to turn this into an ongoing gathering. The old party member who was behind the organizing of this meeting explained that it could not have happened without at least some high-level support. In Zhengzhou, a similar forum led by leftists and “liberals”—a term that, in China today, often includes those who are more radical than their counterparts in the West—has met for the past decade, bringing together those who hold a wide range of views. Their common ground is a strong sense that the current direction of Chinese society and of official policies is not sustainable. Thus, despite their differing backgrounds and approaches, there are many who fall roughly within all three left categories—“old,” “Maoist,” and “new”—both inside and outside party and state bodies and institutions, and not only their ideas, but also their various forums and meetings, overlap, interpenetrate and influence each other, and even draw in those who do not share their ideologies. Within the new NGOs, there are some with a strong leftist basis, who are working on such practical issues as providing schools for impoverished rural villages and promoting a more worker- and peasant-run society than mainstream foundations do. This return of the left reflects the increasing strength of the popular struggle among the working classes, which has made it impossible any longer to avoid addressing the social crisis in China and the threat that it will only deepen without a radical change in current policies. It reopens the possibility, however distant it may seem today, of a renewal of the revolutionary socialism of the Mao era.

A striking example of this new opening on the left is a letter to Hu Jintao from a group of “veteran CCP members, cadre, military personnel and intellectuals” in October 2004, called “Our Views and Opinions of the Current Political Landscape.” Though more respectful in tone than the Zhengzhou 4 leaflet, and giving some positive credit to the “reforms” for their economic gains, it parallels very closely the same themes as that statement and, with its calls for corrective action and a return to the socialist path and away from the “capitalist road,” is equally militant in its critique of the present situation. Whether there was any direct relation between these two documents is unclear. But leftists in China continued gathering signatures in support of the Zhengzhou 4, and the eagerness with which parts of the “new” left have embraced their cause and the defense of such “Maoist” activists is opening up more space for “old” leftists to reassert their long standing critiques as well—such as in the letter to Hu. This willingness of veterans of the earlier revolutionary struggles to come out so openly against the current policies of the party and state is a measure of the newer climate that is emerging. As late as 1999, our discussions with older leftists made clear how restrained they still felt they had to be in the face of the prevailing reform atmosphere. Now, it is clear, many of these former leaders and those in similar positions feel “freed up” to voice their opinions more openly. It is not just in theory, therefore, that the past continues to inform the present, and that the actions of one part of the left have an impact on others, but in practice as well.

In a few cases, small in number but sometimes quite large in their influence, the socialist forms of organization of the Mao era continue to be implemented today, though necessarily in modified form to meet the new conditions of the market economy. Thus even now some 1 percent of rural villages, accounting for several thousand overall—the numbers vary depending on who is doing the measuring and just what they consider as criteria—have never fully abandoned the collectivization of the commune era. Even a few that did implement the Deng reforms have moved back again toward collectivized production, becoming a model for others exploring alternatives for the rural economy. The most prominent example of maintaining the goals and methods of the socialist era, Nanjiecun (South Street Village), a “Maoist” town in Henan Province an hour or so outside Zhengzhou, which



began recollectivizing 15–20 years ago, continues to function as a form of commune for all its members, with essentially free housing, health care, and education—even paying for the college expenses of its young people. It upholds the egalitarian practices of the socialist era as well, such as paying its administrators no more than the wages of a skilled worker. It also remains devoted to the political goals of Mao, whose photos and sayings, together with images of other revolutionary leaders—including Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin—are prominently displayed throughout the village. Here multistoried housing complexes, with light and airy apartments that are provided to each member family, are surrounded by spotlessly clean avenues, promenades, and gardens. The village has an attractive school and child care center. Such a setting is virtually unique in China—outside of the new compounds of the urban rich—and clashes sharply with the more typical rural environment found just beyond its walls and gates.

But even with such successes, there are many contradictions in the practices of Nanjiecun, as it draws on foreign investment for much of its financing, and uses peasants from the surrounding area—housed in decent, but decidedly less comfortable dorms—as the main labor force in its “township enterprises,” which are fully integrated into the new capitalist economy. Recently, according to activists in Zhengzhou, including two who accompanied us on a visit to the village, it has faced serious financial difficulties, due largely to overexpansion into new and unfamiliar areas of production. But despite such limitations—inevitable in a situation where it is surrounded by a sea of capitalism and must compete in the market economy in order to survive—it serves as a focal point for those who still believe that another road is possible for rural China. Delegations come on a daily basis—sometimes made up of entire busloads of peasants or workers—from all over the country to study how it has continued to practice both collectivized production and distribution. It has also received the blessing, and thereby the protection, of Henan provincial authorities. The 2004 open letter from leftist party veterans to Hu Jintao pointed to Nanjiecun as a model for what is still needed in the rural areas today. But even where the legacy of the Mao era is not so prominent, its experiences and concepts remain the background against which the conditions of the present are constantly being compared and analyzed.

A major development apparent in the summer of 2004 was a new movement toward forming agricultural cooperatives, in an effort to ameliorate the isolation and insecurity of family responsibility farms in the face of the global market. These coops are aimed primarily at achieving some economies of scale in the marketplace—through collective buying of fertilizer, for example, and greater leverage in negotiating prices for their crops—as well as offering financial support and security to their members. Such efforts are a significant move away from the individualistic sink-or-swim policies of the reform period, even if they cannot begin to solve all of the dire aspects of the situation that faces the peasantry as a whole. Though they are not a return to the communes, and represent at most a kind of semi-recollectivization, they continue to draw not only on the experience of earlier coop movements from before the revolution, but on concepts from the Mao era as well, in which members are often well-versed. It is not unusual, therefore, to encounter those like the head of a coop that we visited near Siping, in northeastern Jilin province, who gave a very detailed comparative analysis of the rural and urban classes and their situation today, or the young member who delivered a long and in-depth discussion from a socialist standpoint of the situation of the country, not only internally, but in relation to the rest of the world. The Chinese working classes not only have things to teach urban intellectuals about the real world of work and exploitation, therefore, they are also more experienced in the implementation of socialism in practice. And in many instances they are more fully developed in their understanding and application of the basics of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, than some of the young, more educated leftists.

At the same time, the rapid polarization of society is moving many within the new middle class, regardless of their specific occupation or position, into conditions that more closely resemble those

faced by workers and peasants, leading to a growing basis for unity between them, and helping to create a mass base for a revival of the left. The capitalist system is devouring its own and rapidly generating ever-wider groups of the alienated. Today, even many Communist Party cadre in former state-owned enterprises end up being kicked out after they have helped to sell them off to private investors. They are not kept on by the new capitalist owners, a condition that one worker described as “burning the bridge you just crossed.” As a consequence, many of them are now also unemployed and understand better what “marketization” is really about —“it raises their consciousness.”

Such newer understandings resulting from changing conditions in their own lives are common. We heard more than one story from those who had initially embraced the Dengist reforms—such as a progressive academic we talked with in Beijing—who are now moving back toward Mao and even reexamining the Cultural Revolution itself. In some instances, this is a direct result of their “learning from the masses.” Such is the case with one prominent but formerly quite conservative student of the rural areas, whose “conversion” came about because, when he visited the peasants, he never heard one word of criticism of Mao, but many of Deng, forcing him to reexamine his own attitudes toward the past. But such reevaluations have much deeper roots than just some personal experiences. For many, including among the intellectual elite, the various ideological tendencies that have flourished since the beginning of the reform era—from the rationales for marketization and privatization with special Chinese characteristics put forward by state and party propagandists, to Western liberal concepts found mainly in academic and NGO circles—are proving inadequate to explain what is happening in China today.

As both a former Red Guard and a young activist intellectual put it in separate conversations, having “tried everything else,” those who had initially favored the reform policies, but who are now groping to understand what is happening, “have to return to the two-line struggle and the Cultural Revolution to deal with the present,” because they have tried other approaches and these do not offer an explanation.

While just a few years ago, the problems facing Chinese society seemed to be specific and therefore still subject to being relatively easily “fixed”—for example, through an “anti-corruption” campaign—today there is a growing sense that they are systemic and intractable, requiring a much more fundamental transformation, one that capitalism and the global market have no ability to carry out, and that the state and party, as presently constituted, will not be able to resolve. As a result, the critique of the capitalist road that Mao put forward during the Cultural Revolution once again seems increasingly relevant today, because these ideas, advanced in the last years of his life, continue to offer the kind of thoroughgoing analysis of the current system that gets to the root of its growing contradictions, and point to deeper solutions than just attempts at amelioration. Many previous taboos among intellectuals are therefore beginning to fall.

Even the Cultural Revolution, still largely anathema to most academics and others among the elite—we were told that any hint of a positive attitude toward it could lead to peer isolation and a ruined career—is once again becoming a topic of discussion and reexamination. This is especially true among young leftists who are doing their own historical research, digging up long neglected materials, conducting interviews with those who were active during that period, posting their findings on the Web, and in other ways challenging the official party line on the events of that era.

There are other highly significant signs of this growing revival of the left and of its expanding ties with the working class struggle. In 1999, we visited with students at Qinghua University in Beijing—often referred to as the MIT of China—who were taking part in a small Marxist study group, one of a few that had sprung up recently, especially at the more elite universities. I remarked at the time that to be effective, they would have to find a way to get outside of their campuses and link up with the working classes, something that the Tiananmen student movement of 1989 had initially

failed to do. In that struggle, though many workers in Beijing, at least, later joined in—and in turn suffered the brunt of the murderous violence and repression that brought it to an end—the gap between the students and working classes had not been fundamentally bridged.

In Changchun in the northeast, for example, where a smaller version of the same movement took place, workers at the vast First Auto plant refused to join the students who walked out of the universities—a bitter experience that had left the latter exposed to very harsh repression and led them to reevaluate their own isolation from the working classes. In the end, as has happened so often in Chinese history, it was the largely peasant army from the outlying provinces that was brought in to crush the movement in Tiananmen—after the regiments stationed near Beijing had resisted doing so. The lessons of that time have not been lost on the current generation of young student leftists, and the change by the summer of 2004 could not have been more dramatic. Today, activist students in significant numbers are leaving the university campuses to make contact with the working classes, to study their conditions, offer them legal and material support, and carry reports of what is happening in the factories and on the farms back to their schools.

One veteran Red Guard from the Cultural Revolution who is still a key leftist organizer in Zhengzhou explained how there has been a big change in the student-worker relationship. Beginning as far back as 2000, students from the Marxist study group at Beijing University, the leading higher education institution in the country, came to visit factories in that city. From 2001 to the present, student groups from Qinghua University have come every year. In 2004, as many as eighty students came from yet another major Beijing campus to Zhengzhou. The national authorities are fearful of these growing contacts and are attempting to discourage them. In contrast to the free train rides and other encouragements offered to students wanting to move around the country during the Cultural Revolution, the government today tries to stop this flow, even refusing to sell tickets to the student delegations, or denying them the right to get off in Zhengzhou—but they still come. They go to the factories, and some even lived in them during the earlier stages of the struggle in that city, to try to help stop the plant closures. After this movement started in Zhengzhou, it spread to the northeast, as well as to other parts of the country. It also extends to the rural areas, where students go to the villages to carry out similar activities, bringing materials, setting up contacts, offering legal support, and generally breaking the isolation that many peasant activists feel. Today at Beijing University, and many of the other institutions of higher education, an organization called the Sons of the Peasants—which despite its name includes many “daughters” as well—has been formed specifically for this purpose. A leftist activist we met with in 1999, who at that time seemed virtually alone in directly investigating working-class conditions and encouraging others to do so, explained that by 2004 the students seemed highly self-motivated, no longer needing leadership from those like him. Now, it is they who are taking the initiative.

This movement is both driven and facilitated by the changes in the makeup and conditions of the university student body itself. With a tripling of college enrollments since 1999, larger numbers of students are drawn from working-class families and many of them face ever greater difficulty in financing their education and finding work after graduation. The result is an expanding social basis for empathy and unity among many university students and workers and peasants. Chinese universities today are less the preserve of the privileged and have a more mass character than was the case in the early years of the reform, when in reaction to the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping emphasized being “expert” instead of “red” and enforced a return to more exclusive entrance requirements. As a result, student leftists are now bridging the gap between the elite intellectuals and those who are struggling in the factories and farms—who are today more commonly their own relatives, or at least members of the same classes from which they come. In some respects, therefore, the current stage in China resembles nothing so much as the early days of the Russian Revolution, when Lenin led Marxist students to the factory districts to link up with the workers. The

critical difference now, of course, is not only that many of the students come from worker and peasant families, but that young Chinese leftists, even as they grope with how to establish a new relationship with the working classes, have behind them fifty years of revolutionary socialist experience under the leadership of Mao on which to build. The concepts, policies, and relations of that era cannot—and should not—be applied without alteration to the very different situation of today. But they remain a vast reservoir of revolutionary ideas and practices on which the left can draw in confronting the conditions of the working classes in the face of the capitalist reforms and the current stage of global marketization. Far from being new, leftist ideas are already deeply embedded among the workers and peasants.

Nevertheless, it would be a serious mistake to exaggerate these tendencies. The Chinese left as a recognizable force is still small, marginalized, and divided—like the working classes themselves—into many groupings and factions. As is the case with leftists across the globe, they have had to face the crumbling of the world they once knew, and they are trying to find new paths forward without any single unifying set of concepts around which to organize themselves and mobilize the working classes. To a large extent, it is the workers and peasants themselves who are in the lead in China today, carrying out what are at times enormous struggles. Though these are often led by leftists within their ranks, there is so far little if any larger organized movement of the left as a whole. New competing ideologies—including liberal reformist and social democratic concepts—also pose a challenge to leftists. In a development that echoes the situation in the United States, even the term “class” itself is used less today, and instead there is now talk of “weak social groups” in the marketplace, while the very concept of exploitation is made less explicit. These tendencies are reinforced by the lifestyle of many urban professionals, whatever their politics. Some intellectuals, including those who consider themselves leftist, are now making good money in the cities and are largely isolated from any practical ties to the working classes, whose conditions can seem increasingly remote compared to their own experiences.

For those who do attempt to take public positions or to translate their ideas into action, suppression is widespread, though it is not necessarily focused on the right or left. Rather, whether the government takes action is more a question of how far outside the accepted framework one goes. Even a migrant organizer who favors the reforms and advocates privatization of land in order to turn peasants into independent “citizens” was nevertheless detained for trying to hold a meeting in Beijing to promote “human rights.” Any openly organized attempt to end one-party rule is a line one cannot cross, and anything that seems to undermine state dominance over all areas of public activity can quickly lead to trouble, regardless of its specific political content.

The left, however, is seen as a special threat by the authorities, since it has the potential to give more organized form to the rapidly expanding working-class struggle. Typical in this regard is the closing of the China Workers’ Website and Discussion Lists. Unlike most other such forums, this was “the first leftist-run website in China that enabled workers and farmers to talk about their struggles to defend socialism in today’s China.” On it intellectuals, including those within the working classes themselves, could “participate in discussions with workers about workers’ issues” [1]. This linking up represents a particular threat to the party and state leaders because, as one of the members of the Web site editorial collective in Beijing explained it, “the government is not making socialism.” It is on this basis that “workers differentiate between the Communist Party of the Maoist period and today’s party.” From the standpoint of the working classes, having their voices heard publicly is critical. “This is the kind of thing a socialist democracy would want, for workers to have the kind of democracy that capitalism couldn’t provide.” But the Web site was instead shut down, through imposition of an exorbitant registration fee that members of the working classes could not afford.

Among the workers and peasants, the broader ranks of intellectuals, and within the new middle class as well, there is a very wide demand for greater transparency in both the economic and political

systems and for the right to have a more participatory share in decisions that affect them. Though U.S.-style electoral “democracy” may still lack widespread appeal, many people are talking about democratic rights quite openly. For some of them freedom of speech is the main goal, for others opposition parties are. Many workers now even talk about how the “one-party system does not work.” Forums are taking place, even within the party, looking for ways to have more space for open debate, and the “civil society” NGOs springing up cover a wide range of issues, such as women’s rights and the environment.

Pro-democracy feelings are widespread, therefore, and the government knows it cannot just repress them. It is trying instead to meet this challenge by introducing change gradually. But official reform policies in this area—such as elections of village governments—despite a surface democratization, are often met with cynicism by the working classes, since they are largely just used to ratify top-down party nominations. Here, as in so many other areas, the memories of the socialist era, and especially the participation of workers and peasants in running their factories and farms, and even universities and local governments, during the Cultural Revolution, still continue to serve as a benchmark and stand in sharp contrast to the stripping away of all such political rights today. As one worker put it, “Democratic reforms as implemented so far by the government turn the Mao revolution on its head, and turn the lives of workers upside down—they are a form of retaliation and reprisal on the working class.”

The key to an acceptable approach to political reformation, therefore, will be finding a way once again to bring together leftist concepts of worker and peasant control with the participatory democracy that is now part of the global progressive agenda. This search has already begun. In the 2004 letter to Hu Jintao from the left veterans of the revolution, one of the principle demands was to reinvigorate mass struggles from below as a means of controlling the abuse of power and to give the working classes themselves a direct role in the functions of the party and state, as part of a democratic system. The barriers to building a united movement and carrying out such revolutionary changes are, however, as daunting in China as they are everywhere else today. Despite their legacy from the past, older workers and peasants are fearful that if a new level of the struggle for socialism is not reached soon, the memory of the era of revolution will die out, and those in the younger generation will know and pursue nothing but the desire to get rich and join the consumer culture. In that case, they will have to start over again, as it were, from scratch, if and when they finally face the need for fundamental change.

But the Chinese have the advantage that they have been there, done that before. As distant as the prospect can seem at times, China still has the possibility of a fast track to renewed socialist revolution, a development which would once again shake the world. This is, to be sure, only one among the many possible scenarios for what will happen in China in the near future. The complexity and polarization of its class structure are pulling Chinese society in contradictory directions, with the potential for a wide range of outcomes.

This is evident in recent developments, both in the conditions of the working classes themselves and in the response of the party and state to new challenges. In an attempt to head off further turmoil in the countryside, the two top leaders, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, have introduced a series of changes in rural policy that have had quite dramatic effects. These include the elimination of the agricultural tax on the peasants, as well as of most local fees—many of them illegal—that were a main source of protests. There are also plans for increased investment in the rural areas, including in factories in the smaller cities and villages, and especially in education and health care, and environmental restoration. Together with more favorable pricing for agricultural goods, these adjustments have significantly relieved the economic pressure on many peasant families. There is even official talk of New Socialist Villages, though the meaning of that term is so far not clear, and may simply be an attempt to give a more left-sounding label to the rural policies already introduced. The depth even of

the reforms within the reforms that have been announced remains to be seen, especially given the record of non-implementation on the local level—which is an endemic factor in Chinese governance—and the relentless selling off of village land for development by often corrupt officials, which continues unabated in many areas. One impact is already very clear, however. In a striking reversal of the situation just three or so years ago, the export zones of the coastal regions are experiencing an increasing shortage of workers, as migrants are returning in large numbers to their villages, or at least to inland cities closer to their homes, partly to take advantage of the improvement in conditions there, as well as in a growing rejection of the harsh exploitation of the coastal factories. This reverse migration is a reflection of the heightened consciousness, resistance, and self-organization of the migrants, many of whom are now seasoned veterans, and who will no longer accept the conditions that lured them in their younger years. Even the stream of young migrant workers, and especially poor peasant women, who were preferred by the factories and faced the most extreme exploitative conditions, is also beginning to dry up.

While this has had the positive effect of forcing the export industries to begin to raise wages and benefits in an effort to continue to lure a sufficiently large work force, there are also already signs that employers are racing to the bottom, by moving their factories to even lower-cost countries such as Vietnam, India, and Bangladesh. There is no simple solution to how to revise the current system, therefore, since every action sets off further contradictions, given the nature of the global capitalist market into which China is increasingly tied. Though the internal market is growing, any serious drop in global competitiveness and a resulting economic slowdown—the great fear that haunts the Chinese leadership—would not only quickly undermine the ability to carry out the revisions in policy that Hu and Wen are attempting, including a new emphasis on “social equity,” but it would also threaten disorder on a massive scale.

The inability of capitalistic marketization to resolve such contradictions continues to give the left new strength. A striking example of this growing influence was evident in March 2006,

*[F]or the first time in perhaps a decade, the National People’s Congress, the Communist Party-run legislature [was] consumed with an ideological debate over socialism and capitalism that many assumed had long been buried by China’s long streak of fast economic growth.*

The controversy has forced the government to shelve a draft law to protect property rights that had been expected to win pro forma passage and highlighted the resurgent influence of a small but vocal group of socialist-leaning scholars and policy advisers. These old-style leftist thinkers have used China’s rising income gap and increasing social unrest to raise doubts about what they see as the country’s headlong pursuit of private wealth and market-driven economic development....Those who dismissed this attack as a throwback to an earlier era underestimated the continued appeal of socialist ideas in a country where glaring disparities between rich and poor, rampant corruption, labor abuses and land seizures offer daily reminders of how far China has strayed from its official ideology. (*New York Times*, March 12, 2006)

Though the property bill will likely pass in some form in the long run, proposals for “allowing an expanded role for the market in education and health care,” and the even more radical calls for privatization of land, have been set back at least for now.

Even the top leadership have felt compelled to turn at least on the surface once more in the direction of socialism—which remains the theoretical basis of the government and of the Communist Party, despite their capitalistic practices.

*Since his rise to power in 2002, Mr. Hu has also tried to establish his leftist credentials, extolling Marxism, praising Mao and bankrolling research to make the country’s official but often ignored*

*socialist ideology more relevant to the current era. (New York Times, March 12, 2006)*

The methods of the Mao era have even been revived in an effort to restore the waning legitimacy of the party, which is now widely viewed as deeply corrupted.

*Like a giant company concerned with organizational disarray and a sinking public image, the Chinese Communist Party is trying to remake itself into an efficient, modern machine. But to do so, it has chosen one of its oldest political tools—a Maoist-style ideological campaign, complete with required study groups.*

For 14 months and counting, the party's 70 million rank-and-file members have been ordered to read speeches by Mao and Deng Xiaoping, as well as the numbing treatise of 17,000-plus words that is the party constitution. Mandatory meetings include sessions where cadres must offer self-criticisms and also criticize everyone else. (*New York Times*, March 9, 2006).

Taken seriously as an effort at reform by some, and met with considerable cynicism by others, the campaign may be less important for its direct impact than for its admission that the party has strayed too far from its role to "serve the people," as Mao called upon it to do, much less from its original revolutionary goals. Few if any expect Hu and Wen to lead a revival of the socialist revolution, or even to make radical deviations from the capitalist path to which the party and state have been committed for thirty years, and with which the economic forces are now so tightly bound up. But the official promotion of socialist concepts and the study of Mao can only open more space for a revival of the left to address the gathering crisis. Reversing a certain tendency toward insularity and isolation from recent global forums, there is also increasing knowledge of and closer ties to the struggles of leftist forces around the world—despite government attempts to limit such links—through the new and rapidly expanding networks of global communication and organization.

The worsening conditions of the working classes are pushing them rapidly in a more radical and militant direction. Within the ranks not only of the workers and peasants, but among many intellectuals and at least some of the broader new middle class as well, there is a deep and growing understanding that global capitalism has no answer to their situations, and that the revolutionary socialism that they built under Mao offers at least the outline of another way forward today. In the factories and on the farms, workers and peasants in China not only are resisting the new forms of capitalist exploitation, but have memories of another world that they already know is possible. From their lives during the socialist era before the reforms, they are aware that viable alternatives exist to the uncontrolled rampage of global capitalism.

Despite this legacy, any simplistic return to the past is neither possible nor desirable. Too much has been changed, and too many genies have been let out of the bottle to simply put them back again. The failures and mistakes of the past, as well as the successes and victories, will have to be reexamined, and new ways will have to be found to overcome the limitations of the first era of socialism, in China, as elsewhere. No easy prediction is possible as to what direction the struggle will take in the coming period. But as they move forward, the Chinese working classes may also look backward as they find their own path again to a new socialist society, one that combines their historical and current struggles with the global movements of today, and that brings about a revolutionary transformation once more.

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**P.S.**

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<http://www.monthlyreview.org/0606weil.htm>

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## Footnotes

[1] Stephen Philion, "An Interview with Yan Yuanzhang," MRZine:

<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/philion130306.html> See on ESSF: [An Interview with Yan Yuanzhang on the China Workers' Website and Discussion Lists](#)