

1922

Nowhere were Communist efforts at labour organising as successful as in Anyuan, Jiangxi Province, a coal-mining centre and railway terminus that in the 1910s employed more than 10,000 miners and 1,000 railway workers. In the autumn of 1921, at a time when the mine was experiencing severe economic difficulties and battling warlords were forcibly conscripting miners, Mao Zedong—then in charge of labour organising in neighbouring Hunan Province—personally travelled to Anyuan to understand the situation of workers in the area. In December, he returned for a second, brief visit and, soon thereafter, sent fellow Hunanese Communist Li Lisan to set up a school for workers. Li was only twenty-two and had just returned from France. Taking advantage of his family networks and proving extraordinarily adept at dealing with the secret societies that dominated the area, he managed to obtain the support of the local authorities for the endeavour. With the permission of the local government, on 1 May 1922, the Communists publicly inaugurated the Anyuan Railway and Mining Workers' Club with a gala parade in which hundreds of workers carrying red flags marched, shouting revolutionary slogans—a display that Mao criticised with the conviction that mobilisation had to proceed gradually. In the following months, the club would establish a consumer cooperative that challenged the mining company's monopoly over workers' lives and organise its own militia. After Mao again visited Anyuan, in the summer of 1922, he decided that the time was ripe for a major strike and dispatched another up-and-coming Hunanese Communist, Liu Shaoqi, to assist in the negotiations. The strike began at 2am on 14 September 1922 and quickly spread to the whole workforce. Demands included payment of back wages, improvements in working conditions, reform of the labour contract system, and a guarantee of recognition and financial support for their newly established workers' club. It was a resounding success. Not only would Anyuan serve as the paramount centre of the Communist labour movement in China in the following years, but also the town would become a revolutionary mecca for decades to come.

The Anyuan Strike of 1922: Lessons in Leadership

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On 14 September 1922, the first major industrial strike mobilised and led by operatives of the newly founded Chinese Communist Party (CCP) erupted at the Anyuan (安源) coalmine in Jiangxi Province.¹ Launched in the name of the CCP-sponsored Anyuan Railway and Mining Workers' Club (安源路矿工人俱乐部), the dramatic five-day walkout by more than 13,000 miners and railroad workers succeeded in winning major concessions for the strikers: payment of back wages, improved working conditions, reform of the labour contract system, and a guarantee of recognition and financial support for their workers' club.²

The Anyuan 'great strike' of 1922 has attained iconic status in the history of the Chinese Communist revolution as an early expression of proletarian prowess. The Marxist intellectual and labour organiser Deng Zhongxia highlighted its signal importance in his canonical chronology of the labour movement: 'The strike demonstrated the great enthusiasm and courage of the masses ... It was a complete victory.'³ Even an anti-Communist historian acknowledged its significance, characterising Anyuan as 'the most notorious strike in the annals of the Chinese labour movement'.⁴

The impressive size and success of the strike, coming so soon after the establishment of the CCP and directly attributable to its organisational efforts, were certainly sufficient to justify a prominent place in the history books. But more important than the event itself were the lessons in mass mobilisation that Anyuan bequeathed to future Communist efforts. Here in embryonic form was a pattern—derivative of and yet distinctive from Russian precedents—that would inform the CCP labour movement for years to come.

The Role of Secret Societies

Labour unrest at Anyuan pre-dated the advent of the Communists. For decades before the 1922 strike, the coalmine had been the site of frequent protests. This is not surprising when one considers the industrial setting. The mining company at Anyuan also owned the adjoining railway that transported coal across provincial lines for use in enterprises throughout

the Yangzi River Delta. Sociologists Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel, in their influential cross-national study of labour strife, identify coal mining and railroads as the two most consistently strike-prone industrial sectors due to the concentrated and interconnected working conditions.⁵ Anyuan was a combustible combination of the two.

Structural conditions alone do not automatically produce insurgency, however. To move beyond wildcat strikes requires premeditation and organisation. Social movement theorists point to the critical role of mobilising networks in marshalling popular protest.⁶ In the case of Anyuan, a secret society known as the Red Gang (红帮) had performed this intermediary function since the opening of the mine in 1892. The Red Gang's chieftain, known as a 'dragon head' (龙头), not only controlled the local opium and gambling dens, pawnshops and brothels; his lieutenants also acted as labour contractors for the mining and railway company, introducing fellow villagers to jobs in return for a hefty share of their wages. Quasi-religious initiation rites, magical charms and amulets, martial arts routines, loyalty oaths, clandestine codes, and the like heightened members' deference to Red Gang patrons and strengthened fraternal bonds of association and mutual aid among the rank and file. The gangsters-cum-contractors, while closely connected to company management, nevertheless stood to gain financially from increases in workers' wages. For that reason, they were motivated to leverage the secret society's symbolic and coercive power over the workers to organise strikes for higher wages.

When Mao Zedong and his fellow CCP cadres in the Hunan Labour Secretariat targeted Anyuan as a promising site for the nascent Communist labour movement, they realised that the Red Gang's hold over the workers would pose the biggest challenge to their ambitions. Following Lenin's revolutionary playbook, which was standard operating procedure for the new CCP, they initiated night-time classes for workers in hopes of instilling a radical ideology to replace the 'feudal superstition' of the secret society. Important as this pedagogical effort was, it soon became clear that CCP activities at Anyuan were not carbon copies of Soviet practices. Rather, these efforts showed an ingenuity and originality that would come to distinguish Chinese communism from its Russian roots.

Enter CCP Organisers Li Lisan and Liu Shaoqi

Credit for the tactical innovations that allowed CCP operatives to supplant Red Gang chieftains as leaders of the Anyuan workers belongs above all

to Li Lisan, a young activist from the neighbouring county in Hunan Province who had just returned from a work-study program in France. Introduced to Anyuan by fellow Hunanese Mao Zedong, Li leveraged both his insider knowledge of local customs and his cosmopolitan credentials to cultivate a charismatic persona that proved immensely appealing to the workers. His lively teaching style, eye-catching apparel, and reliance on familiar folkways—from lantern festivals and lion dances to religious processions—all contributed to Li's ability to recruit a large and loyal following among railroad workers and miners alike. Uninhibited in both personality and work style, Li Lisan's flamboyant manner was as alluring to ordinary workers as it was alarming to his Party superiors. Li sashayed ostentatiously around the grimy coal-mining town, dressed either in a long Mandarin gown or in a Western coat and tie, in a fashion designed to attract attention. When the shiny metal badge (acquired in France) that he sported on his chest generated rumours of his invulnerability to bullets, Li did nothing to dispel them. On the contrary, taking a cue from the Red Gang's 'dragon head', whose authority resided in his reputation for supernatural powers, Li actively encouraged the belief that he enjoyed the magical protection of foreign countries.

Li's personal magnetism and imaginative approach to labour organising enabled swift progress in moving from a workers' night school to a labour union (known euphemistically as a 'workers' club') to an all-employee walkout. On the eve of the planned work stoppage, Mao sent to Anyuan another young Hunanese labour organiser, Liu Shaoqi, to provide overall direction to the impending strike. Having just returned from training in the Soviet Union, Liu was known for his dour demeanour and a disciplined Leninist work style that Mao evidently believed would be useful in tempering the instincts of the exuberant and impetuous Li Lisan. Together, Li and Liu fashioned a winning formula that combined enthusiasm and energy with calculated restraint. The result was an ability to secure the support of secret-society notables and other key members of the local elite in addition to ordinary workers, garnering widespread public sympathy for the demands of the strikers. This was an approach that would serve the CCP well not only in the Anyuan strike of 1922, but again three years later in Shanghai's momentous May Thirtieth Movement.

Li Lisan came up with a stirring strike slogan: 'Once beasts of burden, now we will be men' (从前是牛马, 现在要做人). Significantly, the plea was framed not in terms of class struggle, but as a cry for human dignity.

This *cri de coeur* was elaborated in a strike manifesto, also composed by Li Lisan, that emphasised the desperate and defensive motivation behind the work stoppage:

Our work is so hard and our pay is so low. We are often beaten and cursed, robbing us of our humanity ... We want to live! We want to eat! We are hungry! ... Forced to the breaking point, we have no choice but to go on strike as a last resort ... We are willing to give our lives to reach our goal. Everyone, strictly maintain order!¹⁷

As the manifesto implied, and as Liu Shaoqi insisted, public support would hinge on the ability of the strikers to prevent disorder. With thousands of unemployed workers milling about the town of Anyuan at the time, the possibility of violent conflict between strikers and strike-breakers was of particular concern. Aware that the key to keeping order was the cooperation of the Red Gang, Liu Shaoqi instructed Li Lisan to pay a visit to the 'dragon head' to seek his assistance. Bearing a bottle of liquor and a rooster—the elements of a Triad sworn-brotherhood ritual—Li and several members of the workers' club who were also Red Gang members proceeded together to the secret society lodge. Li strode into the main hall, placed his gifts on the altar, and, using Red Gang codewords that his followers had taught him, indicated his desire to be inducted as a member of the secret society. Seeing that the dragon head was pleased to welcome him into the fraternity, Li shared news of the impending strike and requested that the secret society shutter its opium and gambling dens and suspend all looting operations for the duration of the walkout. When the Red Gang leader pounded on his chest to indicate assent, the strike was called.

The strike began at 2am in the railway yard. Within two hours it had spread, by careful prearrangement, to the entire workforce. At each of the more than forty work stations, yellow flags bearing the characters for 'strike' (罢工) were unfurled and patrols were stationed to ensure that no-one entered the premises. Workers were instructed to return to their homes or dormitories to reduce the likelihood of violence. The impressive public order that prevailed during the strike reassured local officials and the business elite, who played an important part in negotiating a generous settlement. After five days off the job, with no injuries or major property damage, the strikers won agreement to their demands,

resulting in a substantial wage increase along with the company's pledge of recognition and financial support for the CCP-sponsored workers' club.

From Anyuan to Shanghai

Historians and activists alike have attributed the stunning strike victory at Anyuan to the power of a unified, militant workforce, but leadership was also decisive. Li Lisan's unbridled ebullience and Liu Shaoqi's steely discipline made for a powerful combination that was at once appealing and effective. While studies of contentious politics have paid considerable attention to the importance of structural conditions and network mobilisation in generating and sustaining popular protest, they have had far less to say about the catalytic contributions of protest leaders.⁸ Yet an examination of the history of the Chinese labour movement makes clear that skilful leadership was a key factor in distinguishing CCP-sponsored actions from wildcat strikes or strikes sparked by secret societies.

From its inception, the CCP was attentive to the importance of leadership. Systematic instruction in leadership techniques figured prominently in the training of cadres, beginning with the Peasant Movement Training Institute (农民讲习所) established in Guangzhou in 1923—and continuing with the nearly 3,000 Party schools (党校) that operate across China today.⁹ The earliest teachings were based on Soviet methods of agitprop, but over time the revolutionary experiences of the CCP itself provided rich material for emulation. The Anyuan 'great strike' is among these paradigmatic exemplars.

That the CCP regarded the Anyuan strike of 1922 as a model of labour movement leadership was already clear three years later, when the Party tasked Li Lisan and Liu Shaoqi with joint responsibility for directing another critical labour protest.¹⁰ In the spring of 1925, a strike wave broke out in Japanese-owned cotton mills in Shanghai. On 15 May, a Japanese foreman killed a cotton worker active in the strike during a factory confrontation. CCP propagandists took the initiative in publicising the worker's death, generating widespread sympathy for the mobilisation. On 30 May, throngs of supporters—mostly workers and university students—marched through the streets of Shanghai's International Settlement to express solidarity with the strikers. When British police unexpectedly fired on the demonstrators, leaving ten dead and another fifty seriously wounded, the historic May Thirtieth Movement (五卅运动) was born.¹¹

The tragedy of May Thirtieth presented the Chinese Communists with an extraordinary political opening, which they were quick to seize. The very next day, the CCP-sponsored Shanghai General Labour Union (总工会) (GLU) was inaugurated under the chairmanship of Li Lisan and general management of Liu Shaoqi. As had been the situation at Anyuan, domination of the labour force by secret societies—in the case of Shanghai, the infamous Green Gang (青帮)¹²—posed a major obstacle to Communist inroads. As had also been the pattern at Anyuan, Liu laboured quietly behind the scenes to curb the threat of violence and cultivate support among the local business elite while Li cut a more flamboyant figure. At the invitation of a Green Gang bathhouse proprietor, and with Party approval, Li was duly initiated into the secret society. As a British police report observed with alarm at the time, ‘Red and Green Gangs have joined forces with labour agitators ... and given allegiance to Li Lisan.’¹³ In part because of these gangster connections, the GLU was able to turn the May Thirtieth Movement into a strike wave of unprecedented scale. In Shanghai alone, more than 200 enterprises with more than 200,000 workers participated. Factory foremen and labour contractors, many of whom had gang connections, were crucial in sustaining the walkout. They assisted the GLU in distributing strike pay to the idled workers from a fund donated by the city’s Chinese Chamber of Commerce.

Maintaining order in the industrial metropolis of Shanghai proved a good deal more complicated than had been the case in the company town of Anyuan, however. Rival labour unions controlled by competing gangster networks presented an ongoing challenge to the GLU. So, too, did unruly workers who insisted on grabbing more than their fair share of strike pay. The resulting disruption of public order generated concern among the business elite, who—three months into the strike—were growing tired of the GLU’s incessant demands for strike fund contributions. By late August, the GLU felt compelled to declare an end to the work stoppage. Although the negotiated settlement offered only modest gains for the strikers, it served the important political purpose of establishing the GLU as the recognised representative of organised labour in the city. For the next year and a half, until Chiang Kai-shek turned on the Communists in the bloody massacre of 12 April 1927 (see S. A. Smith’s essay in the present volume), the CCP wielded considerable influence as the voice of labour in China’s industrial capital.

Mandarins and Rebels

The Anyuan strike of 1922 and the Shanghai May Thirtieth Movement of 1925 marked milestones in the early development of the CCP labour movement. In both cases, many of the workers who participated in the events were seasoned veterans of labour protests that pre-dated the founding of the CCP. But the appearance of Communist cadres introduced a newfound dynamism and discipline to these ongoing struggles. Although CCP organisers followed a Soviet script that called for establishing night schools and trade unions as a prelude to strike actions, they also improvised to adapt to local conditions. In Republican China, where workers laboured under the thumb of gangster-contractors, access to the working class by would-be revolutionaries required first infiltrating and then inhibiting secret-society activities. Success in conducting this dangerous mission demanded not only deep familiarity with native conventions, but also daring, bravado, and steely discipline. Individual cadres evidenced such traits in unequal measure, however, and leadership training, useful as it was, could not always override innate temperament. A noteworthy feature of CCP operations—first adopted at Anyuan and later elaborated in Shanghai—was a judicious and self-conscious balancing of mobilisation styles that checked charisma with caution by deploying leaders known for contrary yet complementary personalities and proclivities.

Political scientist Lucian Pye pointed to a dichotomy in Chinese political culture between ‘mandarins’ who enforced centralised control and orthodox thought, and ‘rebels’ who embraced a free-wheeling relaxation of central controls and freedom from orthodoxy.¹⁴ According to Pye, this dualism runs through the history of both Confucian and Communist China, helping to account for radical policy swings when one type of leader is replaced with its opposite. But contrasting leadership styles may appear concurrently as well as consecutively, with the two types acting in concert to fulfil a common objective. The history of the Chinese labour movement illustrates the powerful role that such complementarity can play in facilitating strikes. It thus supports an argument that has been put forward with respect to social movements more generally: ‘When leaders with opposing styles are able to work out an effective *modus vivendi* that affords due play to their competing approaches, the likelihood of success is greatly enhanced.’¹⁵