1925

After the 7 February Massacre of 1923, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had to reevaluate its strategy of relying on the strength of the working class alone to gain power. In light of their defeat, the Communist leadership not only began considering a broader alliance to wage the struggle, but also, prompted by their Soviet advisors, started taking Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Party (Guomindang, or GMD) more seriously as a possible partner during the stage of national revolution. In January 1924, this rapprochement resulted in the First United Front between the two parties, which allowed leading members of the CCP to take up important positions in the ranks of the GMD as individuals, while retaining their separate CCP membership. As a result, Communists were able to recover from previous setbacks and build their strength not only among workers but also among peasants. The alliance was always uneasy and largely held together by the personal prestige of Sun Yat-sen and the pressure of the Soviet Union, which saw the GMD as the local actor most likely to succeed in launching a national revolution in China. However, the First United Front also took important steps forward for the Chinese labour movement under the aegis of the struggle against imperialism—the first and foremost example being the general strike that took place in Guangzhou and Hong Kong in 1925, which is the focus of this essay.

From the May Thirtieth Movement to the Canton–Hong Kong Strike

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> These strikes, at first skirmishes, sometimes result in weighty struggles; they decide nothing, it is true, but they are the strongest proof that the decisive battle between bourgeoisie and proletariat is approaching. They are the military school of the working men in which they prepare themselves for the great struggle which cannot be avoided.
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> — Friedrich Engels, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1845)[1]

> We are resolved to lay down our lives in the struggle against imperialists and capitalists: never will the workers of Hong Kong allow the imperialists within our territory freely to crush us.
>
> — Canton–Hong Kong Strike Committee (1925)[2]

For the past century, the May Thirtieth Movement in China and the subsequent Canton–Hong Kong Strike (省港大罢工) of 1925–26 have been glorified in both the pro–Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the pro–Nationalist Party (Guomindang, or GMD) history books.[3] The strike, in particular, was a turning point in contemporary Chinese history as union power swelled in Guangzhou at a time when the city was administered by the joint partnership between Nationalists and Communists commonly known as the 'United Front'.[4] Unfortunately, this brief honeymoon would come to an end in 1927 when the GMD launched a brutal purge, imprisoning and killing thousands of worker activists throughout China, particularly in Shanghai, Wuhan and Guangzhou, leading to the demise of China's burgeoning militant labour movement (see S.A. Smith's essay on 1927 in the present volume). One century later, this essay reflects on the contributions and tribulations of the revolutionary working class in China in those early years.

The May Thirtieth Movement

In the early 1920s, Shanghai was China's manufacturing hub and a favourite destination for foreign investment. Its many foreign concessions under British, French and Japanese control formed the city's International Settlement, which was governed by its own municipal council. Strategically, the newly born Communist Party set up its Chinese Trade Union Secretariat there in August 1921 to coordinate labour-organising activities, including evening schools, publications and confrontational collective actions.

On 15 May 1925, in response to labour unrest, the managers at the Japanese-owned No. 7 Cotton Mill (Nagai Wata Kaisha) locked out the workers and stopped paying their wages.[5] When Japanese supervisors beat Chinese workers in the ensuing confrontation, a twenty-year-old Communist named Gu Zhenghong challenged them but was shot four times and subsequently died. This incident enraged the general public in Shanghai. The CCP instantly launched a campaign calling for solidarity with the textile workers, a boycott of Japanese products and a public funeral for Gu. In response, the Shanghai International Settlement authorities arrested many more workers and students. To counteract the repression, a public procession was announced for 30 May 1925. Nearly 10,000 protestors marched along Nanjing Road and demonstrated outside the police station in which more than 100 demonstrators were being detained. By 2pm, a British inspector ordered the police to open fire at point-blank range, killing thirteen and seriously wounding several dozen protestors.[6] This violence triggered the mass mobilisation that went down in history as the May Thirtieth Movement.

The CCP quickly called on all the local trade unions for an emergency meeting and established the Shanghai General Labour Union (上海总工会). Together with the student and traders' associations, the Party formed a citywide alliance that launched a 'triple strike' (三罢)—a joint mobilisation by workers, students and businesses to protest against the reckless brutality of the foreign powers. The alliance put forward seventeen demands, including the removal of the emergency measures that had been put in place to manage the popular unrest, the punishment of those responsible for the violence, compensation for the victims, respect for Chinese workers' rights to publish, assemble and speak freely, and equal rights for Chinese citizens in the International Settlement. In response,

the imperialists reinforced their armed units to stifle the general strike with more violence. Within one month, the business circle unilaterally decided to sabotage the general strike by resuming business as usual and the Shanghai General Labour Union had to negotiate settlements with the foreign employers one by one.

In spite of its short life, the Shanghai general strike spread like wildfire, with 135 solidarity strikes occurring in various provinces in its wake, the most notable being the Canton–Hong Kong Strike.[7]

The Canton–Hong Kong Strike

A British colony since 1840, Hong Kong was not immune to industrial strife and class conflict. Time and again, workers rose up to demand their economic, social and political rights against all odds, such as the mechanics' strike of 1920 and seamen's strike of 1922.[8] Hong Kong unions in those early days were mainly craft unions, clanship or dialect groups, or triad societies. They had close ties with their Chinese counterparts, particularly those from Guangzhou.[9] During his days in exile, GMD leader Sun Yat-sen used Hong Kong as a revolutionary base to plan the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty and was well connected with waterfront workers, seafarers and mechanics, who helped him smuggle weapons and occasionally mobilised as combatants for uprisings inside the mainland. He encouraged the formation of modern trade unions along industrial lines—his most significant successes being the seamen's and the mechanics' unions.[10]

The 1911 revolution opened up political space for trade unions in southern China, whereas the northern and central parts of the country were ruled by different warlords who were natural enemies of the labour movement. Under these conditions, the Chinese labour movement in the south was becoming increasingly militant and anti-imperialistic. On 1 May 1925, the Second Labour Congress, representing 166 trade unions, was convened in Guangzhou and declared the foundation of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), which immediately decided to affiliate with the Red International of Labour Unions (see also Wang Kan's essay in the present volume).

When the shocking news of the Shanghai massacre of 30 May 1925 arrived in the south, the ACFTU and other groups called for a demonstration on 2 June in Guangzhou and started to plan a solidarity strike. A working team comprising key union figures from Hong Kong and

the mainland was formed to prepare a general strike similar to the one taking place in Shanghai but also drawing from the experiences of the previous mechanics' and seamen's strikes in Hong Kong. Deng Zhongxia, representing the ACFTU, Su Zhaozheng, the leader of the seamen's union, and others were dispatched to Hong Kong to gain support from local unions from different factions.[11] The call easily won support from the local patriotic Chinese community, including the triads, and the final mass turnout surprised even the organisers.

On 19 June, the first salvo of the strike was fired by seamen, tramway workers and printers. Simultaneously, Hong Kong students began their mobilisation. Soon, employees in Western-style businesses, waterfront workers, coal workers, postal workers, cleaners, construction workers, laundry workers, food workers, gas workers and electrical workers joined the swirling ranks of the 250,000 strikers—nearly one-third of the total population of Hong Kong and half of its labour force. The whole city was paralysed as outbound and inbound transportation came to a stop.

The strike committee adopted a statement in two parts originally released by the All-Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions.[12] The first part stated the strikers' support for the struggle that was taking place in Shanghai and its demands. The second part advanced a series of requests, including: freedom of speech, publication, association and to live in any district; the right to strike and collective bargaining; equality under the law and the suspension of deportation and flogging for local Chinese; universal suffrage; and labour legislation covering things such as an eight-hour workday, social insurance and a minimum wage.

Lured by the promise of food and lodging, and with full support from the Guangdong revolutionary government, the strikers began to drift back to Guangzhou or to nearby villages. The left wing of the GMD faction pledged a subsidy of 10,000 Chinese dollars per month to the strike committee.[13] Abandoned houses, casinos, brothels and boats were requisitioned and turned into dormitories, dining halls and offices for strikers. By 21 June, as a full embargo against the foreign powers was imposed, 3,000 Chinese workers collectively left Shamian, a joint British and French settlement on an islet in central Guangzhou, to join the general strike. With foreign warships moored nearby, the Hong Kong and Shamian administrations declared an emergency curfew.

Two days later, on 23 June, a public procession in solidarity with the May Thirtieth Movement, comprising 100,000 soldiers, workers, farmers, students and traders, was organised in Guangzhou. When the students

were marching along the opposite bank of Shamian, the joint foreign security force suddenly opened fire, killing fifty-two people and wounding more than one hundred.

To consolidate worker power during the general strike, the organisers established the Canton–Hong Kong Strike Committee (省港罢工委员会; hereinafter, 'Strike Committee') under the ACFTU. This new body was labelled by foreign observers a 'second Guangdong government' because it was entrusted with judicial, legal and police powers and had its own armed pickets, schools, hospitals, court, detention centres and publications.[14] The 2,000-strong armed picketers received training from the officers of the Whampoa Military Academy. They even controlled a 'navy' of twelve patrol boats to deter smugglers along sea and land routes of Guangdong Province. In several operations, though poorly armed, these fighting units exchanged gunfire with the British forces in Hong Kong and with pirates, and 120 picketers died while carrying out their duties.

The highest governing body of the strike was the Delegates' Congress, which counted about 800 members, each of whom was democratically elected.[15] They met publicly every second day and the meetings were open to all striking workers. By the end of 1926, the conference had met 178 times. The congress chose a thirteen-member Strike Committee represented by the ACFTU (two members), Hong Kong unions (seven members) and the Shamian/Guangzhou unions (four members). Supported by an advisory committee, the Strike Committee headed six special organisations: the Picketing Department, Financial Department, Stores and Auction Department, Joint Hearing Department, Workers' Hospital and the Workers' Propaganda Training School. Under its executive council, there were five departments: transportation and communication, public relations, reception, propaganda, and recreation.

Throughout the strike period, the organisers emphasised training and propaganda work. They put out a weekly newspaper named *Workers' Path* (工人之路), which reached a circulation of 10,000 copies at its peak. The Strike Committee also ran eight primary schools for the children of the strikers, eight extramural schools for the workers and a labour institute to train militant labour activists, similar to the famous Peasant Movement Training Institute run by Mao Zedong in Guangzhou. Special schools were also organised for women and youth.[16]

Sustaining the Strike

Economically, Hong Kong was devastated by the strike, with a wave of bankruptcies, bank runs, property market and entrepot trade collapses and ships stranded in the harbour. Hong Kong, which literally means 'fragrant harbour', in those days was mocked as a 'stinky harbour' due to the public health emergency caused by sanitary workers, rubbish collectors and cleaners joining the strike. The strike caused the city to lose seven million Hong Kong dollars every day, turning the government account from a surplus into a deficit.[17] Although the colonial ruling class tried to lobby the British Parliament to send an army to defeat the Guangdong 'Bolshevik' Government, as in the good old days of the Opium War, the British Government was preoccupied with mounting domestic labour problems.[18] The home authorities limited themselves to loaning £3 million to the Hong Kong Government to cover its deficit. By adopting a 'wait and see' approach, they were hoping the Chinese warlords would defeat the revolutionary government. The Hong Kong Government also tried to subsidise and arm the reactionary forces in China to overthrow the revolutionary government, but these forces were quickly quelled by the new revolutionary army.

To sustain the strike, the Strike Committee decided to limit the embargo to only British interests. Ships that did not display a British flag, did not carry British goods and did not call at Hong Kong were allowed to trade with Guangzhou. This measure boosted Guangdong trade, as merchandise was no longer routed through Hong Kong.

In May 1926, the Third Labour Congress was convened in Guangzhou, with the participation of 699 labour organisations claiming to represent 1.24 million members. The congress summed up the labour struggle of the previous year and made an open appeal for the launch of a Northern Expedition to defeat the warlord forces that still controlled most of China and to reunify the country under the banner of the GMD.

As the Northern Expedition kicked off in July 1926, all human, financial, political and diplomatic resources were drawn together to support this new endeavour. As well as those who enrolled as soldiers in the army, 3,000 strikers joined as porters, medical aids and auxiliary personnel. Many prominent labour leaders took up new official positions or helped

to build new unions in the recently captured cities. By October, the revolutionary army seized Wuhan and set up a national government there, with Su Zhaozheng as the Minister of Labour.[19] In January 1927, armed picketers broke the British barricade and occupied the Jiujiang and Hankou foreign settlements. After negotiation, the British surrendered. This daring but assertive move paved the way for the armed uprising in Shanghai in the spring of 1927.

The Strike Committee and the revolutionary government reached a consensus that unification of China was the paramount task and, as a result, they declared the suspension of the strike. While many strikers returned to Hong Kong to look for employment, around 30,000 were left behind in Guangzhou; a special import levy of 2.5 percent was collected to alleviate their difficulties. The Strike Committee continued to operate for a few more months, even as it was forced to go underground after military rule was imposed in the wake of the GMD coup of April 1927. The fateful Guangzhou uprising led by the CCP in December 1927 caused many more strikers to lose their lives (see Day's essay in the present volume). Only in November 1927 was the sign board of the Strike Committee forcefully removed by the GMD government—an act that drew the final curtain on the Canton–Hong Kong Strike.

The Post-Strike Scene

The Hong Kong Government was not slow in suppressing the humiliated labour movement. By 1927, it had hastily enacted the notorious Illegal Strikes and Lockouts Ordinance, which joined the existing Boycott Prevention Ordinance and Emergency Regulations and Societies Ordinance. At least fifteen trade unions and labour organisations were outlawed during that period. Based on the UK model that had been enacted after the 1926 General Strike in Britain, the new law aimed to 'suppress the illegal activities of unions rather than to encourage their legal ones'.[20] A strike would become illegal if it had any objective other than the resolution of a trade dispute and if it was designed to coerce the government, either directly or by inflicting hardship on the community or any substantial portion of the community. The law further banned civil servants and workers in essential public services from participating in any industrial action. To sever the umbilical cord of the China–Hong Kong union relationship, the law outlawed the control of any Hong Kong union by any trade union or organisation from outside the territory, as well as the use

of union funds for any political purposes.[21] Instead, the colonial government attempted to domesticate the local unions into 'bread and butter' or 'responsible' unions, with a focus on purely economic and livelihood interests that did not touch on political issues, particularly those related to China. In the 1930s, the government established the consultative Labour Advisory Board comprising union and management representatives to discuss labour legislation and related labour issues but with an agenda dominated by officials. The colonial government also utilised culture to defuse radical sentiments and the influence of the CCP by promoting traditional Chinese culture and literature, subsidising anti-Communist newspapers and elevating members of the Chinese elite to state offices.[22]

Many returned strikers and Communist members continued to support the national liberation movement from Hong Kong, under the watchful eyes of the Hong Kong police in close cooperation with their GMD counterparts. As the white terror was unleashed in China, Hong Kong became a haven and a coordination centre for the Communists. Time and again, small pockets of Communist militants were mobilised in the colony in flash gatherings to distribute leaflets or to shout slogans in public areas, only to be dispersed or arrested by the police. The police's Anti-Communist Squad rounded up Communist activists in ongoing raids, deporting the unlucky ones to mainland China, where they faced further persecution, including the death penalty.[23]