

1967

The mass mobilisation phase of the Cultural Revolution began as a student movement on the campuses of Beijing's universities and middle schools in the summer of 1966. However, under the direction of cadre work teams, the movement quickly degenerated into a crisis over political representation. After a fight to a stalemate, the withdrawal of the work teams triggered a new stage of direct but also violent political action that paralysed Chinese Communist Party and state administrations by the end of the year. Worker mobilisation in Shanghai led to the usurpation of the municipal government in early 1967, signalling a new phase in the movement. The so-called January Storm (一月风波), a dramatic wave of rebel power seizures in which workers figured prominently, swept the country. Its apogee was the declaration of the Shanghai People's Commune in early February; yet its denouement came only a few weeks later, when the rebel workers agreed to reorganise as a 'revolutionary committee', uniting forces with some of the cadres they had dispossessed as well as local military leaders. The January Storm thus marks an unresolved dilemma in the Party's history: the Cultural Revolution originated in a crisis over the Party's role in political representation, which the Maoist leadership sought to overcome through the direct political action of students and workers with the nominal aim of self-rule. But the Party's monopolisation of power deprived rebel workers of the resources necessary to build and sustain a lasting alliance. When the coalition quickly collapsed, Party leaders gradually reverted to the flawed mechanism of representation through delegation that triggered the initial crisis. This essay focuses on labour's role in the rise and fall of the Shanghai People's Commune through the question of labour's representation in the People's Republic of China.

The January Storm of 1967: From Representation to Action and Back Again

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In January 1967, as China's Cultural Revolution transitioned from a largely student-based upsurge into a worker movement, a wave of rebel power seizures of Party and government agencies swept the country. For many, the so-called January Storm (一月风波) marked the culmination of the Cultural Revolution: what had begun as a sustained rebellion of high school and university students in Beijing not only widened to include the working class, but also quickly spread beyond the capital, to major cities up and down the east coast and into the hinterland. The grassroots efforts of rebel workers in Shanghai to overturn the municipal government, and the subsequent declaration of the founding of the Shanghai People's Commune (上海人民公社), were an instance not only of direct political action by the working classes, but also of the proletariat in China acting *for* itself as a political subject, rather than *in* itself as an object. Alessandro Russo hails the commune's founding as the culmination of a process of 'experimenting with a new political existence for workers who were no longer under the sway of the Stakhannovite model, and, hence, were able to organize their collective existence regardless of whether the party-state could endorse such an action'.¹ On the other hand, as Alain Badiou observed, this triumphant achievement was 'immediately paradoxical': the Shanghai People's Commune may have been originally intended as 'a complete countermodel of the party-state', but because the existing political landscape of the Cultural Revolution was already oversaturated, the newborn commune could 'obtain only a fragile unity'.² Thus, he argued, 'the entrance onto the scene of the workers' marked 'a spectacular broadening of the revolutionary mass base' and 'the short-lived outline of a new articulation between the popular political initiative and the power of the state' that ultimately could not challenge, but only reproduce, the existing structures of power.³

Others are considerably more sceptical about the grassroots nature of the Shanghai takeover and the upheavals of the January Storm, casting doubt on official portrayals of the event as worker-led. Independent historian He Shu argued that Central Cultural Revolution Small Group (CCRS) members Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan not only failed to support, but also actively suppressed, repeated attempts by rebel workers to topple the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee. He argues that although Zhang and Yao were in principle not opposed to power seizure per se, they actively thwarted any effort that they did not directly control.⁴ More recently, Andrew Walder described the 1967 national power seizure as ‘a top-down process of diffusion [that was] essentially a form of collective behavior by party-state cadres’ responding to signals from the central leadership in Beijing.⁵ In his analysis, the rapid diffusion of the power seizures to areas without large student and worker insurgencies, alongside the participation of cadres in these events, suggests that the mobilisation was driven by Party-State officials, calling into question basic assumptions about who, precisely, was seizing power from whom.

However, debates about the spontaneity of the January Storm elide a more profound dilemma in the Party-State’s history: the unresolved problem of mass political representation, and its relationship to direct political action. This essay focuses on the January Storm, and what the brief life of the Shanghai People’s Commune tells us about the unresolved question of labour’s representation in the history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

‘Real’ and ‘Fake’ Party Members

The mass mobilisation phase of the Cultural Revolution began in May 1966 with the hanging of a wall poster at Beijing University denouncing the university’s president and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) secretary and two other municipal officials as ‘revisionist elements’ linked to a recently purged ‘anti-Party clique’. The accusation created an uproar on campus, exacerbated by tensions within the faculty and student body that had been simmering for at least several months, if not years, and resulted in the widely publicised removal of those accused.⁶ This, however, did not prevent instructors and students at other campuses from posting similar

accusations, particularly following the publication of the original poster on the front page of the *People's Daily* a week later.⁷ As the month wore on, Party and state officials attempted to defuse escalating unrest on school campuses by dispatching cadre work teams to investigate, instruct and contain rebellious young activists who had already begun forming the loose autonomous associations that came to be known as the Red Guards.

At the forefront of the escalating tensions between the student activists and work team members were questions of political representation: who had the right to speak on behalf of student interests, who represented various Party and state departments and, finally, who represented the Party centre and the revolutionary agenda itself? The front-page commentary of the *People's Daily* had described the members of the 'anti-party clique' as the representatives of a 'fake' and 'revisionist' Communist Party (假共产党, 是修正主义的党), and warned readers that anyone who opposed the instructions of Mao Zedong or the Party Central Committee—'no matter what banner they carry or how high their position or qualifications are'—were in reality 'representing' (代表) the interests of the overturned bourgeoisie, thereby placing the question of who was representing the 'real' Communist Party up for public debate and speculation as tensions soared.⁸

At Qinghua University, third-year chemical engineering student Kuai Dafu was singled out by the work team as a troublemaker and sequestered in his dorm room in early July. During his confinement, he produced his own wall poster arguing that the political power previously monopolised by the school's discredited Party committee—overthrown by student rebels—had been in effect transferred to the work team. Kuai called on all 'revolutionary leftists' on campus to ask themselves: 'Does this power represent [代表] us? If it represents us, then we'll support it, if it doesn't represent us, then we'll seize power again!'⁹

This broader battle ended in stalemate with the withdrawal of the work teams from Beijing's schools in August and inaugurated the start of a new phase marked by direct, and sometimes violent, political action: self-authorized student rebels and activists fanned out across the city and the country, seeking to mobilise support for various agendas, many of which targeted Party and state officials and agencies. The dislocation and disruption caused by student activists roaming the country in such large numbers succeeded in completely 'paralysing' (瘫痪) nearly one-third of provincial capital administrations by the end of 1966.¹⁰

From Students to Workers

The first major delegation of Red Guard representatives from Beijing arrived in Shanghai during the so-called blood-red August of 1966. Disembarking from the main train station, the members of the visiting Red Guard contingent announced they were the representatives of a genuine revolutionary movement seeking to 'light a fire' (点火) by spreading the Cultural Revolution to the Paris of the East.¹¹ They were not pleased with what they saw. Despite the fact that an official welcome had been staged for them at the city's Cultural Square, the delegation inveighed that their reception had been insincere and subpar. Within days, the Red Guard delegation followed up with additional complaints. First, they had been turned away from several Shanghai schools because they lacked proper letters of introduction; they were also dismayed to find that they had to purchase tickets when boarding public transportation, when they had become accustomed to free passage elsewhere; and, finally, the delegation members were frustrated that it had been difficult to arrange meetings with local CCP leaders. On receiving the complaints, the Municipal Party Committee offered its apologies, but the Red Guard delegates were not appeased. On the morning of 31 August, more than a dozen Beijing Red Guards marched to Yan'an Road, demanding a meeting with the municipal Party leadership. A crowd of more than 1,000 onlookers quickly gathered as the visiting Red Guards angrily rushed the building. They found mayor Cao Diqu inside, meeting with two other self-described Beijing Red Guard representatives who had likewise demanded an official audience. In the fracas that ensued, Deputy Mayor Song Liwen was struck on the head by one of the Beijing Red Guard representatives, and the glass front door of the building was shattered.¹²

A few days later, on 10 September, a second wave, of tens of thousands of Beijing Red Guards organised into divisions and battalions, arrived in the city, calling themselves the 'Southern Touring Regiment of Capital Universities and Institutes' (首都大专院校红卫兵司令部南下兵团). Defying the Central Committee's September 1966 ban on allowing the Cultural Revolution to disrupt industrial production, the Beijing Red Guard representatives entered factories and workplaces around Shanghai in the name of establishing the 'Worker Student United Movement' (工人学生联合运动).¹³ A third group, dispatched by CCRSG members

Jiang Qing and Zhang Chunqiao, arrived in early October and quickly established links with rebel workers in nearby factories with the goal of overturning the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee.¹⁴

Labour Ascendant

One month later, on 6 November, the Capital Red Guards Liaison Station in Shanghai organised a meeting that attracted at least thirty workers from seventeen different factories; on that occasion, the Shanghai Workers' Revolutionary Rebels General Headquarters (上海工人革命造反总司令部, hereinafter WGH) was founded, with Number 17 Cotton Mill security officer Wang Hongwen as its chair. At its inaugural meeting, held on the city's Cultural Square, the organisation demanded that the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee recognise it as a legitimate revolutionary mass organisation. The mayor and municipal Party secretary refused, with support from the Party centre, arguing that the WGH was riddled with internal contradictions and detrimental to maintaining industrial production.¹⁵ When the mayor further declined to attend the 9 November inaugural ceremony, and moreover refused to 'participate, recognise or support' the new organisation, more than 1,000 angry workers surrounded the municipal Party committee building and staged a sit-in, before deciding to take their protest to Beijing.

Well over 1,000 self-declared representatives of the rebel workers headed to Shanghai North Station the next morning to join three trains bound for the capital, seeking recognition from the central leadership. A State Council directive from Premier Zhou Enlai halted the trains, snarling national rail lines for hours. The train that happened to be carrying WGH leader Wang Hongwen and 2,000 members was stopped outside Anting Station, approximately forty-five kilometres from Shanghai's city centre, leading to a standoff between the workers and local authorities. The WGH put forward five demands: 1) that the WGH be officially recognised as a legitimate revolutionary mass organisation; 2) that the WGH's founding meeting and the Anting incident be classified as revolutionary actions; 3) that the East China Bureau and the Shanghai Party Committee be held responsible for their part in the matter; 4) that the mayor offer a public self-criticism; and 5) that the WGH receive assistance from the Party and local government.¹⁶

The CCRSG dispatched Zhang Chunqiao to mediate the conflict. Within a few hours, he conferred official recognition on the new rebel workers' organisation—in violation of the instructions of the enlarged Politburo Standing Committee meeting held just prior to his dispatch—claiming to be representing the CCP Central Committee in so doing. At the Politburo meeting the following day, Mao supported Zhang's decision to recognise the workers' right to organise, based on their constitutional right to do so.¹⁷

The official recognition of the rebel WGH as a legitimate mass organisation triggered a flurry of grassroots organisation-building as other interests likewise sought official recognition conferring the associated right of representation in the new and still-emerging political hierarchy. For example, within days, Shanghai's 'conservative' workers—that is, those workers who supported the existing municipal Party committee and enjoyed a close relationship with local Party authorities—sprang into action, demanding a voice and a seat at the table as well. Li Jianyu, the soon-to-be local leader of the conservative Scarlet Guards (赤卫队) at the Number 31 Cotton Mill, approached his work team leader, requesting permission to assist in destroying 'black materials' following a call that 'representatives of all factions' participate.¹⁸ Because the work team at the mill made up one of the factions there, and the rebel workers another, the team leader retorted: 'We represent organisations; what do you represent?' Li replied: 'Then I'll establish an organisation, too!' The mill's Scarlet Guard unit was founded a mere two hours later, and quickly joined forces with like-minded conservative workers across the city. Although short-lived, the organisation faced off against the rebel forces in two high-profile incidents in December before their popular support dwindled amid the widespread strikes, work stoppages and slowdowns that paralysed the city.

Word of the founding of the WGH in Shanghai set off a flurry of rebel activity across the country. Within days of the WGH's official recognition, more than 1,000 rebel workers from Chengdu in Sichuan headed to Beijing to petition central authorities, who hastily assembled forces to turn them back at Wuhan.¹⁹ Hundreds of temporary workers in Beijing banded together to establish the All-China Red Labourer Rebels' Headquarters, colloquially known as the Quanhongzong (全红总), and quickly established branches in more than a dozen provinces. Throughout December and into early January, the organisation staged rallies and sit-ins targeting the official All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) and the

Ministry of Labour in Beijing, demanding official recognition and labour policy reforms, while mobilising their branches elsewhere to engage in similar protests.²⁰

Labour unrest had become sufficiently protracted in Nanjing by the end of 1966 that the municipal Party committee was dispatching ranked officials into factories to read aloud their self-criticisms to contingents of rebel workers in hopes of placating them. In Guangzhou, rebel workers succeeded in invading and closing the two major Party news offices in mid-December. In the smaller city of Shijiazhuang, a clash at a textile mill that wounded 300 rebel workers in early December escalated into calls to ‘bombard’ (跑打) municipal authorities, leading to an invasion of a municipal government office on 25 December. The net effect of these events—ranging from rebel invasions of Party and government offices to the seizure of local officials and the formation of sweeping coalitions of rebel workers—succeeded in paralysing Chinese cities, from provincial-level Shanghai down to prefectural-level small centres across the country.²¹

The January Storm

The power seizure that occurred in Shanghai on 6 January 1967—the first such seizure at the provincial level²²—was chiefly motivated by rebel coalitions’ desire to restore public order and resume public services to municipalities in which Party and government offices had effectively collapsed. Although the WGH and a coalition of allied rebel organisations staged a mass meeting to ‘drag out’ the municipal Party secretary, the mayor and other high-level cadres and subject them to public criticism, criticising local authorities was not the WGH’s initial objective. Instead, at the organisation’s core was a skeletal ‘Frontline Command Post to Grasp Revolution and Promote Production’ (上海市抓革命、促生产火线指挥部), with the relatively modest ambition of restarting Shanghai’s transportation networks. One WGH leader at the time recalled how, on the evening of 7 January, the new Frontline Command Post’s key concern was merely to reopen the rail links and Shanghai’s main port, because the paralysis to which the city had succumbed was clearly ‘a ploy by capitalist roaders to destroy production and suppress revolution.’²³ The grander ambition of self-rule seems to have been suggested by CCRSG

members Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan, who, in an early meeting with the Frontline Command Post, declared: ‘This is a newly born thing, a new form of political power. We really must sum up this experience.’²⁴

Meanwhile, on 8 January, Mao extolled Shanghai and its rebel coalition; the following day, the *People’s Daily* published an ‘Urgent Letter to the People of Shanghai’, adding an editorial comment commending them for responding to Mao’s call for workers to ‘grasp revolution and promote production’, underscoring that the lessons learned were relevant not just for Shanghai but also for the entire country.²⁵ The national media lavished praise on the WGH’s takeover of the city beginning less than a week later in a series of articles and radio broadcasts urging rebels across the country to follow Shanghai’s example.²⁶ The *People’s Daily* on 16 January claimed that, in the ‘experience of seizing power from a handful of capitalists within the Party’, Shanghai’s rebel coalition had ‘provided correct principles, policies, forms of organisation and methods of struggle.’²⁷ Less than a week later, the newspaper called for a national bottom-up seizure of power through a great alliance to ‘shake China’ to its very core.²⁸

By the end of January, more than half of China’s 2,215 cities and counties had experienced seizures of power and, by the end of March, the authorities in more than 75 percent had been overturned.²⁹ Only days after the publication of the ‘Urgent Letter’, rebel organisations of workers in Shanxi established a ‘grand alliance’ (大联合) with ‘revolutionary cadres’ (革命干部) and members of the military and announced that they had ‘seized power’ (夺权) at the provincial level.³⁰ Permutations of the Shanxi experience involving alliances of cadres and army units alongside ‘rebel revolutionary’ workers soon followed in Shandong and Guizhou. Finally, on 31 January 1967, Heilongjiang became the first provincial power seizure carried out by a self-declared ‘revolutionary committee’ (革命会)—so named for the governing organ of the Paris Commune that had figured prominently in official newspaper commentaries during the earliest throes of the Cultural Revolution. Within the week, a coalition of thirty-two different rebel workers’ groups declared the establishment of a ‘People’s Commune’ in the place of their municipal government.

However, across the country, the January Storm had already taken events in a new direction. It was the model developed primarily in Heilongjiang—of a ‘revolutionary committee’ (革命委员会) formed as a ‘triple combination’ (三结合) uniting local military commanders, representatives of rebel mass organisations and local revolutionary cadres—that Mao favoured, and which was formally adopted in Shanghai before the month’s end.

The autonomously formed WGH thus inaugurated and completed the five-week political sequence of the power seizure movement by serving as both midwife and gravedigger for the newborn Shanghai People's Commune, closing the circle from political representation to direct action and back again.

After the Storm

On the final day of January, in an article reprinted on the front page of the *People's Daily*, *Red Flag* referred to the power seizures collectively as the 'January Revolution', claiming 'the great storm of revolution started in Shanghai'.³¹ Shanghai's model status notwithstanding, less than three weeks later, the Shanghai People's Commune was renamed a 'revolutionary committee' in accordance with Mao's 23 February instruction, conforming to the 'triple combination' arrangement that Shanxi, Shandong and Heilongjiang had inaugurated weeks before.³² Zhang assumed chairmanship and Yao was appointed first deputy chairman. Locally, rebel worker Wang Hongwen, soon to be elevated to a seat on the CCRSG, served as principal deputy.³³

More importantly, perhaps, the name change marked the beginning of the end of a political sequence: if the first battles of the Cultural Revolution were waged by students as struggles over political representation, and the second by workers as contests over direct political action, the renaming of the Shanghai People's Commune signalled the closure of the rebel workers' brief experiment in nominal self-rule by forcing them into a powersharing arrangement with some of the authorities they had overthrown. In 1972, the WGH likewise renamed itself the 'Shanghai Workers' Representative Congress' (上海市工代会); subordinate rebel units followed suit. By the following year, the former leadership of the WGH was absorbed into the Shanghai Municipal Federation of Trade Unions (上海市总工会), the local branch of the ACFTU, which had ceased operations when the Cultural Revolution began, but resumed functioning in 1970 under rebel worker control. Following the reopening of the municipal ACFTU, subordinate rebel units thereafter became known as 'union' branches and have largely remained as such to the present day.³⁴

Writing in 2006, Li Xun remarked that, prior to the Cultural Revolution, whatever representation workers enjoyed in the political system had been merely 'symbolic' (象征性的). Those designated worker representatives who did exist were actually the heads of the Shanghai municipal

ACFTU, cadres who had led the CCP's underground labour organisations before 1949; none hailed from a working-class background, and all had only limited contact with those whose interests they were appointed to represent. Of the thirty-three key post-holders in the Shanghai Municipal Government in 1950—including the municipal Party secretary and Party standing committee members—only four were local ACFTU members. This number had dropped to a single representative by December 1965, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution.³⁵

Although the events of January and February 1967 dramatically changed the structure of political representation for Shanghai's workers, it did so only temporarily and only at the local level; the worker representatives who made it to positions on the revolutionary committee had to compete against the more experienced cadre members for political influence under the 'triple combination' powersharing system, and were frequently accused of putting the interests of the union above those of the Party. A series of political campaigns targeting rebels in 1969 and 1970 further reduced their numbers. Of the 'worker rebels' who served in ten district government agencies under the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee, 135, or 43.5 percent, had been purged by 1971.³⁶

On a deeper level, the new revolutionary committees also failed to resolve the crisis over political representation. Questions over who had the right to speak on behalf of particular collective interests, and who was authorised to represent the Party and the revolutionary agenda, were effectively taken off the table; the new revolutionary committees were not poised to 'represent' the masses so much as to *be* representative of them. On 19 February 1967, the CCP Central Committee issued a notice that the new organs of political power would ensure that, under the 'triple combination' system, the representatives who were leaders of revolutionary mass organisations would 'truly represent the broader revolutionary masses' (真正代表广大群众的革命群众).³⁷ A March 1967 *Red Flag* editorial republished in the *People's Daily* stipulated that, as provisional organs of revolutionary political power, all revolutionary committees must both display 'representativeness' (有代表性) and exercise 'proletarian authority' (有无产阶级权威的).³⁸ Mass representatives were enjoined to bring the masses 'into full play' (充分发挥) and value their opinions and warned to never 'use them as a foil' (当做陪衬); but beyond such blandishments, the central leadership declined to put in place formalised practices of accountability at the national level.

This failure undermined the ostensible aim of the revolutionary committee: to increase and institutionalise the political representation of revolutionary and rebel workers within the system. Political power in the PRC flows from the centre down by design; it is invested in local organs of government and grassroots actors through mechanisms of authorisation and delegation. The power seizure movement in 1967 thus triggered a desperate scramble at the grassroots, in Shanghai as elsewhere across the country, among local actors and groups seeking central authorisation to legitimise various political agendas. The Central Committee's order regarding the 'triple combination' arrangement of revolutionary committees attempted to guarantee 'genuine' mass representation in the new organ of governance. Yet by failing to designate methods of selection and recall, the actual mechanism of representation under the 'triple combination' system was left largely to local cadres to determine, virtually extinguishing the possibility of a radically new political existence for workers that the Cultural Revolution had promised to deliver.