1980

After losing any residual relevance in the wake of the confrontation with the Chinese Communist Party during the Hundred Flower Movement, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) was dismantled at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, as workers began setting up their own organisations. After a few years of gradual reconstruction of its regional and industrial branches, in October 1978, the Ninth National Congress of the ACFTU was finally convened in Beijing, signalling the organisation's comeback at a time when the Party-State was getting ready to start its ambitious program of economic reforms. On that occasion, Deng Xiaoping gave a speech in which he defined the trajectory of the union for years to come. Starting from the assumption that China was still underdeveloped, Deng emphasised that 'the union has to protect the wellbeing of the workers, which can only increase gradually following the increase in production, especially in labour productivity'. As the ACFTU struggled to keep up with the times, Chinese workers were increasingly restive, their discontent fuelled by the echoes of what was happening in far-away Poland.

Echoes of the Rise of Solidarity in Poland

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In the summer of 1980, in the midst of worker protests, the independent trade union movement Solidarity was established in Poland. These events largely coincided with an outbreak of worker unrest in China. According to diplomatic sources in Beijing, twenty to thirty demonstrations and strikes occurred in the autumn of 1980.[1] In particular, both foreign and domestic regional press reported significant cases of labour unrest in the industrial cities of Wuhan and Taiyuan, in which workers' grievances culminated in demands for the establishment of free trade unions.[2] Instances of labour unrest were apparently largely due to economic causes, reflecting workers' discontent with the material circumstances of their lives. In at least one case, however, the call for an independent union was paired with the articulation of explicitly political, rather than economic, demands. As reported in the *Taiyuan Daily*, a 'minority of workers' at the Taiyuan steel mill, labelling themselves 'the poorest workers in the world', called for 'breaking down the rusted door of socialism', the right to decide their own fate, the end to dictatorship, and the overthrow of the system of political bureaucracy.[3]

Ever since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have displayed a keen appreciation of the potential for the diffusion of ideas and movements throughout the communist—and now post-communist—bloc. Just as Mao Zedong was influenced by political unrest in Hungary and Poland in 1956 to launch the short-lived 'blooming and contending' of the Hundred Flowers Movement (see Gipouloux's essay in the present volume), so, too, his successors, under the direction of paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, sought to apply a preventive response at home to the evolution of events in Poland.[4] The CCP was deeply alarmed by the unravelling of Communist Party rule in Poland and anxious to devise an appropriate strategy that would inoculate China against the reverberating effects of the 'Polish virus'. This essay examines the reaction of the Chinese leadership to events in Poland from 1980 to 1990, with a focus on the extent of their influence on

Chinese labour policy. From the perspective of the Chinese leadership, the Polish situation presented itself as a case that reflected in an exacerbated form problems and tensions also to be found in China itself.

The Chinese Reaction to Solidarity: 1980–1981

When labour unrest erupted in Poland in 1980, the Chinese press responded to the initial crisis with detailed coverage that was circumspect, factual, and, to a considerable extent, non-judgemental. Chinese reporting tended to treat the emergence of Solidarity with some sympathy, describing it as an understandable reaction by desperate workers to grim political and economic realities. Nonetheless, that the Chinese leadership considered the Polish situation to be serious business was indicated by an internal circular of 25 November 1980. Issued by the Propaganda Department of the Provincial Party Committee of an unnamed province, its title, 'Background Reference Material No. 17: Once Again on the Polish Affair', indicated that it was not the first directive on the topic.[5] Three main causes of the Polish situation were identified: errors in economic policy; popular dissatisfaction with the corruption of Party leadership; and a Polish crisis of self-respect resulting from the subordination of the Polish state to the Soviet Union.

Although the circular indicated that 'the significance and influence of the Polish affair were enormous and reached well beyond the boundaries of the Polish nation', the author(s) refrained from drawing explicit parallels with the Chinese conditions. Nonetheless, the circular's discussion of Polish popular dissatisfaction with the low standard of living and endemic shortages in the purchase of consumer goods invited a direct comparison with the Chinese situation, in which industrial wages in state industry in 1980 still lagged behind 1956 levels.[6] Moreover, the circular's identification of Poland's political problems—for example, corruption and special privileges within the Party, a lack of democratic mechanisms for popular consultation, and the low level of party prestige among the working class—reproduced a litany of abuses familiar in China in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and openly recognised by reformers in the Party's leadership. By implication, reform was the key to the resolution of Poland's troubles as well as the means to guard against the transmission of the 'Polish disease' to China. A number of statements by high-ranking Chinese officials explicitly identified reform as an antidote

to the evolution of a Polish-style scenario in China. For example, Li Xiannian, the Vice-Chairman of the CCP, reportedly compared the conditions of China with those of Poland in a July 1981 conversation, noting that if China could not carry out its current economic readjustment, it would risk encountering the same difficulties.[7]

Nowhere did the challenge of Solidarity loom as large on the Chinese political scene as in the elaboration of trade union policy. By 1980, reformers had developed an array of proposals that were meant to rescue the trade unions from their dismal heritage of slavish submission to the Party. These measures in their most liberal incarnation sought to restructure authority relations to give the unions operational independence and the ability to represent the interests of the workers without falling prey to charges of 'economism' (经济主义) or 'syndicalism' (工团主义). As Liao Gailong, a close (although more liberal) associate of paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, pointed out in a work report delivered to high-ranking cadres in October 1980: 'We all know what happened in Poland. If we do not change our course, the same things will happen to us. Will the working class not rise in rebellion? Therefore our trade unions and mass organisations must be thoroughly reformed.'[8]

However, not everybody in the Party leadership shared this perspective. The aforementioned outbreak of strikes in the autumn of 1980 provoked unease, as did the scattered efforts by workers to establish independent trade unions. Possibly even more alarming were reports that dissatisfaction with the operation of trade unions extended beyond rank and file workers into the trade union leadership. Members of an Italian labour delegation visiting China in August 1980 reported, for example, that Chinese labour leaders were following the Polish workers' strikes with 'sympathy and great attention'.[9] Fearing that increased participation and democracy in the unions could be a precursor to societal destabilisation, more conservative voices curbed the reformist proposals at a Central Committee Work Conference held in December 1980, which issued a set of instructions on trade union work.[10]

The Spectre of Poland: 1982–1988

With the imposition of martial law in Poland on 13 December 1981 and the appointment of General Woljciech Jaruzelski as the head of the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP), Polish labour unrest and the

Solidarity movement appeared to have been decisively crushed. Still, the CCP leadership continued to display a keen sensitivity to the potential reverberations of the Polish events on Chinese soil.

A Japanese press report in January 1982 claimed that the CCP had issued an internal document for cadre study in late December 1981 that called on key members of the Party to learn the 'valuable lesson' of the Polish situation and to analyse its causes.[11] The Polish crisis was also apparently a decisive factor in the leadership's decision to remove the clause guaranteeing the 'freedom to strike' (罢工自由) from the new Constitution of 1982. As a practical measure, the action had little significance, but China's leaders apparently feared—with reason—that discontented workers could seize on the phrase as a constitutional mandate for their actions. Significantly, the 'freedom to strike' clause had been ignored in the midst of a movement that culminated in the eradication of the 'four big freedoms' (四大自由)—namely, to 'speak freely', to 'air views freely', to write 'big character posters', and to engage in 'big debates'—from the Constitution in 1980 and did not come under attack until after the founding of Solidarity. Leadership sensitivity over autonomous trade unions and support for Solidarity on the part of workers and union cadres alike was also indicated in late 1983, when Li Xiannian chose the occasion of the Tenth All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) Congress to reprimand Solidarity as an example of sham trade unionism (假工会主义) and to castigate those in the PRC who sympathised with Lech Walesa.[12] In particular, the Chinese leadership sought to maintain centralised vertical control over the trade unions, discouraging the formation of horizontal linkages that would facilitate communication between workers outside their own workplace. To this end, regulations issued in 1984 by the ACFTU specified that 'national, trans-regional, and trans-industrial mass activities should by all means be discouraged'.[13]

By the mid-1980s, it was becoming evident in China that the industrial reform movement launched with high hopes in 1984 was not achieving success comparable with what had been attained in the countryside. Price inflation began to erode and, in a significant number of cases, outstrip wages. The student demonstrations of December 1986 and January 1987 raised an explicit challenge to reform policy in calling for the acceleration of reform and societal liberalisation. Reportedly, Deng evoked the Polish situation in December 1986, when he issued instructions to CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang on how to handle the demonstrators, noting: 'If worst comes to worst, we will impose military control just as the Polish

are doing.'[14] Hu's handling of the students, however, proved insufficiently militant to placate Deng, who jettisoned his erstwhile protégé. The consequent reshuffling of leadership positions, with Li Peng replacing Zhao Ziyang as Premier and Zhao assuming the post of General Secretary within the CCP, proved to be only a temporary solution to the problem of increasing rifts between reformers and conservatives within the leadership.

This dissension within the top leadership was further reflected in labour policy. Although the workers had largely been passive observers during the earlier student demonstrations, by 1987 strikes and industrial go-slows were on the rise in China. Moreover, the development of strains in the Chinese economic reform movement coincided in 1988 with the outbreak of strikes in Poland and the resurgence of Solidarity as a force to be reckoned with on the Polish political scene. Despite the increased strength of the conservatives, policy decisions at the Eleventh Congress of the ACFTU, held in October 1988, indicated a victory for the reformist camp. The congress called for 'drastic changes' for the unions, greater independence, and more authority, with an eye to moulding them into a sort of interest group along the lines of the East European reform experience.[15] Reformist forces were also bolstered by the sudden appointment of Zhu Houze, a close associate of Hu Yaobang, to the number-two position in the trade union hierarchy as Vice-President and First Secretary of the ACFTU. With the Solidarity example lurking in the background, Chinese decision-makers apparently decided that increased democratisation within the ACFTU was preferable to attempts to build alternative structures outside it.

The Tiananmen Protests: 1989

The indecision with which the Chinese leadership reacted to the student movement that evolved after the death of Hu Yaobang on 13 April 1989 reflected a paralytic division between factions within the CCP as to an appropriate response. Fate seemed to will that Hu would die the week following the legalisation of Solidarity in Poland—an event with implications that were lost neither on China's leaders nor on its citizens. That China's leaders were highly sensitive to the possibility that the students and intellectuals would seek a Polish-style coalition with workers was indicated by a letter written by Party octogenarian Chen Yun to Deng in late April 1989, in which he noted: 'We must take strong action to

suppress the student movement. Otherwise, it will only grow bigger and if the workers join in the consequences will be unimaginable.'[16]

In fact, as May passed, workers joined the demonstrations in increasing numbers (see Zhang's essay in the present volume). Speakers seeking to rally demonstrators made pointed references to Solidarity, which subsequently served as a model for students and workers in setting up associations independent of Party control.[17] The best-known worker organisation was the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation (北京工自联), set up in Beijing on 19 May 1989, which claimed to have a membership of 3,000 workers.[18] Subsequently, the movement spread to other Chinese cities. In just several weeks between late May and early June, autonomous unions were established in Beijing, Shanghai, Changsha, Hangzhou, Hefei, Hohhot, Guiyang, Jinan, Nanchang, Lanzhou, Nanjing, Xi'an, and Zhengzhou. In some cities, moreover, multiple autonomous unions sprang up.[19] Small in scale and lacking organisational coherence, these groups, with a membership that was apparently predominantly male and young, nonetheless posed a clear challenge to the positions of both the Party and the ACFTU. In its Provisional Charter, the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation stressed its intent to operate as an 'entirely independent autonomous organisation', defining one of its key functions as 'monitoring the performance of the Chinese Communist Party'.[20]

The establishment of independent trade unions, however, was only one indication of dissatisfaction in the ranks of labour. With the continual breakdown of traditional controls, cadres within the ACFTU itself became increasingly emboldened to present their case against the leadership. Journalists from the *Workers' Daily* were among those who expressed their support for the students' demand for freedom of the press. The publication of an article in the *Workers' Daily* in praise of Hu Yaobang in April 1989 reportedly so enraged President Yang Shangkun that he pressed for the removal of its author or the closure of the paper.[21] Even after publication of a 26 April editorial in the *People's Daily* that condemned the students' movement as illegitimate, the national committee of the ACFTU, as well as local-level trade union committees in Hunan and Shanghai, issued a statement praising the student movement and calling on the CCP and the State Council to engage in dialogue with student representatives.[22] The ACFTU even donated 100,000 yuan to the Beijing Committee of the Red Cross to be used for medical treatment for students on hunger strike.[23]

Although the evidence is inconclusive, the leadership's decision to impose martial law on 20 May was possibly spurred on by the growing militancy of China's workers and open signs of defiance by the ACFTU. Even before the Tiananmen incident of 4 June, workers came in for harsher treatment than students at the hands of the regime. As a journalist noticed at the arrest of four workers in Shanghai: 'These people said the same thing that the students were saying. Their crime was to be workers rather than intellectuals.'[24] In the crackdown that followed, the conditions of incarceration for workers were more severe than for students or intellectuals. In large part, these differences appear to be a function of the higher status and superior connections, both domestic and international, of students and intellectuals in Chinese society. It would appear, nonetheless, that a residual fear among the Chinese leadership of the potential for organised industrial unrest also accounts for some of the ferocity displayed in its treatment of workers. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen events, the CCP reoriented the ACFTU in a more conservative direction as well as purging those members of the trade union leadership (most notably, Zhu Houze) who were deemed too radical. The prominent message at the Third Meeting of the Eleventh Presidium of the ACFTU in July 1989 was the paramount importance of maintaining CCP leadership over the organisation.

The Polish Lesson

When worker strikes erupted in Poland in 1980, the Chinese leadership immediately recognised their significance for the Chinese domestic scene. As in Poland, workers in China were highly dissatisfied with their standard of living and regarded the ACFTU as an ineffectual structure that was unable to defend their interests. Chinese leaders were rightfully concerned about the potential for the 'Polish virus' to spread to China, inasmuch as Chinese labour issues tended to mirror those in Poland, albeit in a less inflamed context. China's leaders were in agreement that the Polish crisis was a cautionary lesson for China. The problem was that they disagreed about the policy implications of that lesson. The reformers sought a greater role for the voice of workers, largely through reforms within the ACFTU; conservatives, meanwhile, feared that greater liberalisation would undermine the leading role of the CCP. In fact, the evolution of

events in Poland—as well as elsewhere in the communist bloc—indicates the immense difficulties in striking a balance between liberalisation and the maintenance of Communist Party control.

During the 1980s, the tensions engendered by the Chinese reform movement intensified, and were further aggravated by the unravelling of communist party-states in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Over time, the conservatives overpowered the reformist wing of the CCP. The political protests of 1989 were deeply disturbing to the CCP leaders who had lived through the traumas of the Cultural Revolution and feared above all political instability. During the Tiananmen events, Deng set forth his own assessment of the events in Poland and the errors of the Polish Communist Party leadership. For Deng, the PUWP had been 'too soft'.[25] Moreover, as he noted: 'Concessions in Poland led to further concessions. The more they conceded, the greater the chaos.'[26] The preeminent lesson that Deng and many of his like-minded comrades drew from the Polish events was the imperative to never relinquish Party control. At the same time, however, this lesson—which remains relevant—not only eliminates the possibility of autonomous worker associations, but also dooms the ACFTU to a subservient existence.