

# 1989

*Although at the end of the first decade of reforms Chinese workers' quality of life had improved, there was a growing sense of uneasiness caused by the incipient dismantling of the welfare system, widespread managerial corruption, and inflation. The death of beloved Chinese Communist Party leader Hu Yaobang in April 1989 catalysed the widespread discontent hanging in the air; to express their grief and grievances, students marched from their universities to occupy Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Workers were also eager to join the protest and, between April and May 1989, independent unions sprang up in several cities in China, the most famous being the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation (工自联). Over the previous decade, the official All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) had attempted top-down reform—first, within the framework of the 'democratic management of the enterprise' (企业民主管理), and then through reform plans that would have laid the foundations for a truly democratic union had they been implemented. Now the time for this top-down approach was up. Sections of the ACFTU supported the students, organising marches, petitions, and donations. After martial law was declared, worker activists bore the brunt of state repression, while the conservative side of the ACFTU launched an internal purge that stripped the union of many of its reformist cadres. To make sense of the momentous events of 1989, this essay looks into the workers' role in the protests and how they shaped China's political landscape thereafter.*

# Workers on Tiananmen Square

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The 1989 Tiananmen Democracy Movement is mostly remembered as a student-led one. In this telling, intellectuals and college students deeply influenced by Western liberalism hoped to push the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to accelerate political liberalisation, which had been rolled out only intermittently during the 1980s. To the extent that this account mentions workers at all, it depicts them as playing a supplementary role: workers and working-class residents in Beijing and other major cities mobilised to demonstrate support for the liberal-minded students.

This dominant account obscures the agency of workers in the movement, for workers not only mobilised on a massive scale but also developed an independent political agenda and strategic outlook that was somewhat at odds with what the students had in mind. Understanding the role of the workers in the movement is thus crucial for understanding both the movement's trajectory and internal contradictions and how it shaped China's political landscape thereafter. Drawing on published scholarly research—particularly an important paper by Andrew Walder and Gong Xiaoxia from the early 1990s<sup>1</sup>—publicly available documents, and interviews I conducted with those who participated in the movement, this essay examines what transpired in 1989 from the perspective of the workers.

## A Workers' Movement

After Hu Yaobang, a much-revered pro-reform CCP leader, passed away on 15 April 1989, students in Beijing's universities set up memorials on their campuses. At the same time, pockets of workers gathered in Tiananmen Square to exchange views about current affairs. On 20 April, after police suppressed a student sit-in in front of Zhongnanhai, the CCP leaders' residential compound, a few angry workers decided to form an organisation that would later evolve into the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation (北京工人自治联合会), henceforth referred to as *gongzilian* (工自联). According to Walder and Gong, this embryonic worker organisation was established even earlier than the Beijing Students' Autonomous Federation.

However, the *gongzilian* at that time was just an informal, loose network of dozens of workers without established organisational structures and did not operate publicly. Members barely knew each other. In April, students remained front and centre in the movement. But after 4 May, the student movement stagnated and declined. Students did not know what to do next and were hesitant to escalate further. Most of them returned to the classroom. Facing such a deadlock, a group of radical students planned a hunger strike to reenergise the movement. In this sense, the hunger strikers accomplished their goal. On 13 May, the first day of the hunger strike, a recordbreaking 300,000 people protested in and occupied Tiananmen Square.

The beginning of the hunger strike marked a turning point; despite a temporary revival of enthusiasm among the students, the movement unavoidably declined again, and after 13 May, the number of students participating in the occupation of Tiananmen Square dwindled. However, the students' hunger strike marked the beginning of workers' participation *en masse*. The enthusiasm of the workers was seen not only in their numbers, but also in the fact that they started to organise their own rallies and marches and display their own banners and slogans. From that point on, workers became a major force in the movement.

Many workers decided to participate due to both sympathy for the hunger-striking students and a sense of moral outrage against the CCP's indifference. A worker I interviewed told me that he decided to get involved 'simply because the state was treating students too badly'.<sup>2</sup> As the number of workers participating in the movement exploded, the *gongzilian* started to make itself publicly known and recruit members on a large scale.

What boosted workers' participation even further was the declaration of martial law on 20 May. As military regiments—most of which had been garrisoned nearby—marched towards Beijing from all sides, a huge number of workers and working-class residents spontaneously took to the streets in Beijing's outskirts, trying to obstruct the military. Workers erected barricades and assembled human walls. They brought water and food to soldiers to fraternise with them and convince them to abandon their arms and stop their march. According to one witness account, during the night right after martial law was declared, hundreds of ordinary working-class residents walked down an alley to stop about thirty military trucks.<sup>3</sup> The action was largely spontaneous, and the participants did not know each other. They were nervous to the point of not daring to use flashlights. People walked in darkness, with bricks in their hands to

defend themselves, unsure of how they would be treated by the soldiers. Fortunately, they found out that the soldiers were not armed, and they engaged in a long and emotionally charged conversation.

In other words, it was workers, not students, who directly confronted the most powerful, repressive apparatus of the state. And workers won temporarily: the military was prevented from entering Beijing's inner core for two weeks.

As Rosa Luxemburg famously argued, the radical consciousness of the workers grows out of the process of struggle itself.<sup>4</sup> The events of 1989 in China proved this. During the struggle to obstruct the military, workers started to realise the power of their spontaneous organisation and action. A huge wave of self-organising ensued. The *gongzilian's* membership grew exponentially and other worker organisations, both within and across workplaces, mushroomed (see also Wilson's essay in the present volume).

The development of worker organisations led to a radicalisation of action. Workers started organising self-armed quasi-militias, such as 'picket corps' (纠察队) and 'dare-to-die brigades' (敢死队), to monitor and broadcast the whereabouts of the military. These quasi-militias were also responsible for maintaining public order, so as not to provide any pretext for military intervention. A witness I interviewed recalled that, a week after the military was obstructed, there were a dozen workers' picket corps active in the Yuetan and Ganjiakou neighbourhoods, just north of the Muxidi area, where the bloodiest battles between civilians and the military took place on the night of 3 June.<sup>5</sup> Another witness said Beijing almost became a city self-managed by workers.<sup>6</sup> One could argue that the situation described here was somewhat reminiscent of Petrograd's self-armed workers organised in soviets in the months between Russia's February and October revolutions.

At the same time, Beijing workers built many more barricades and fortifications on the streets. In many factories, they organised strikes and slowdowns. Li Peng, then China's Prime Minister, later wrote in his diary that, at the end of May, it was rumoured that about 100,000 workers at the Capital Steel Factory were planning to go on strike, which unnerved the CCP's top leadership.<sup>7</sup> Capital Steel was one of the most important industrial plants in Beijing at that time. Had its workers gone on strike, a much larger strike wave would have been likely to follow. A possible general strike was put on the table as well, as several interviewees recalled and Walder and Gong also mentioned.<sup>8</sup> Another rumour widely circulated among the workers was that the All-China Federation of Trade

Unions (ACFTU), China's official labour union, was itself on the verge of proclaiming a general strike, which certainly further emboldened some.<sup>9</sup> To prepare for this possibility, many workers started to build connections between factories. These links remained mostly informal, with workers communicating with each other about the mood of coworkers in their respective workplaces, especially those where strikes and slowdowns had already occurred. It was unclear, however, whether any concerted action was taken to explicitly devise a plan for a general strike.

Self-arming, self-organising, and striking had altogether different meanings to marching, rallying, and occupying. The last three were self-expressive acts, whereas the first three entailed solidly building power over the production process and the management of society as a whole. The radicalism was not in the words workers proclaimed, but in their acts. This was where the movement stood towards the end of May and early June: the students were struggling with declining enthusiasm, dwindling participation, and constant infighting, but the workers were growing stronger and more radical by the hour through self-organisation and self-mobilisation.

There is no way to ascertain why the CCP leaders finally decided to order the military to enter Beijing 'no matter what' and crush the movement. But a plausible speculation is that what terrified the Party leaders was the rapidly growing and radicalising workers' movement. This is consistent with the fact that workers faced much more severe repression than students both during and after the massacre.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, during the final crackdown on the night of 3 June, workers fought an extremely heroic battle against the military. Historian Wu Renhua provided the following account:

That night, a picket team comprising three dozen workers was on duty with [students] on the Square. When the gunshots of the bloody crackdown were fired, the workers rushed towards West Chang'an Street [from where the military was coming]. At around 1am, a young worker covered in blood returned to the Square, saying in tears that he was the only survivor. The other workers had all given their lives ... At that moment, the only two female members of the workers' picket team who were still on the Square threw away their coats and rushed towards West Chang'an Street with great impulse. The students and I cried and advised them

not to go. They fell on their knees, saying in tears: 'Our brothers are all dead, we can't be cowardly' ... In the end, they left with the young man, and never came back.<sup>11</sup>

### What Kind of Democracy?

What grievances drove workers' participation in the events of 1989? Some leftist accounts point to the widespread discontent with the liberalisation of prices and rampant inflation of the late 1980s.<sup>12</sup> These accounts are not wrong, but they do not tell the whole story. In fact, by focusing on economic grievances and material hardship alone, they buy into the somewhat condescending assumption that workers could not be bothered about democracy and other political demands.

In fact, over the course of the movement, the workers did articulate a vision of democracy to which they aspired. This vision, it should be emphasised, originated from workers' firsthand experiences of the lack of democracy on the shopfloor. What probably affected the lives of urban workers the most during the 1980s was not the liberalisation of prices, but the substantial expansion of managerial power over the operation of state-owned factories—something that had begun as an experiment in some localities in 1978 and then developed into a fully fledged nationwide reform in the name of 'strengthening the autonomy of enterprises' (增强企业自主权) in 1984. Managers gained almost unopposed power to allocate the means of production as they pleased, resulting in strengthened one-person rule in urban workplaces and de facto private ownership.

As staff and workers' congresses (职工大会 and 职工代表大会)—the bodies the Chinese authorities had charged with ensuring workplace democracy in those early years of reform—were systematically disempowered and deactivated, workers lost their limited power over decision-making in factories and directly experienced managerial despotism at the point of production.<sup>13</sup> Managerial despotism manifested in things as trivial as regulation over bathroom breaks and sick leave, and as significant as decisions about job assignment and promotion. Several workers I interviewed recounted that what they found most irritating in the late 1980s was the sense that their superiors in the workplace did not treat them with dignity.<sup>14</sup>

With workers feeling oppressed, mistreated, stripped of their dignity, and facing increasing power inequalities, they aspired to democracy first and foremost in the workplace. According to Walder and Gong's analysis

of pamphlets published by the *gongzilian*, the organisation's democratic ideal was intertwined with sharp criticisms of China's official trade union system, which did not really represent workers, and with a vision of workers having the right to organise independent unions, supervise managers, and bargain collectively.

Therefore, it was no surprise that many workers developed an explicitly political understanding of their economic grievances. Again, as Luxemburg showed in *The Mass Strike*, economic and political demands were intricately intertwined in workers' movements. The *gongzilian*'s analysis of inflation, for example, attributed rising prices to the lack of democracy: the 'Stalinist dictatorial bureaucracy' (斯大林主义的专制官僚) had given rise to a layer of bureaucrats who controlled the pricing of domestic and imported goods and deliberately set the prices high to make room for their own hoarding and profiteering.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the only way to eradicate inflation and inequality was to overthrow the bureaucracy as a whole and restore to the workers the power to control the production and circulation of goods. In articulating this democratic ideal, some workers drew on the Cultural Revolution rhetoric celebrating the self-emancipatory potential of the ordinary masses. This partly explains the prominence of certain Cultural Revolution symbols and slogans in the movement.<sup>16</sup>

Democracy as defined by the workers entailed the replacement of bureaucracy with workers' self-management, and the first step towards this goal was to establish democratic and independent workplace organisations. This vision of democracy clearly had a class character, premised as it was on the agency of the working class. In sharp contrast, the democratic ideal articulated by intellectuals and students comprised a set of supposedly universal liberal values. Even though students were also deeply dissatisfied with corruption and official hoarding, their discontent pointed towards an abstract notion of democratic rights and liberty, unlike the belief—widespread among the workers—that democracy should first be established in the workplace realm of the production process.

### The Disconnect between Students and Workers

Given their different trajectories of participation and conceptions of democracy, it is not surprising that a notable disconnect existed between students and workers throughout the movement. Students constantly tried to exclude workers, seeing the movement as 'their own' and seeking to

maintain its 'purity'. Walder and Gong pointed out that, until the end of May, students were adamant that workers' organisations not be allowed to enter Tiananmen Square proper. Students had little interest in communicating or coordinating with the workers, especially the organisation formed by construction workers, most of whom were villagers from Beijing's rural outskirts. Historian Maurice Meisner even argued that 'in the early weeks of the movement, student demonstrators often marched with arms linked to exclude workers and other citizens'.<sup>17</sup> A student who participated in the movement also recounted that students took great care to ensure that the logistical supplies donated by supporters in Hong Kong went to themselves, not to workers.

Excluded by students, many workers started to lose faith in them. They thought the students felt too good about themselves, did not respect workers, and were much better at talking than doing things practically. What alarmed workers most was that traces of bureaucratic elitism, which they deeply resented, started to appear within student organisations. My interviewees recounted how disgusted they felt towards the obsession of student leaders with official titles like 'General Commander' (总指挥) and 'Chairman' (主席) and their internal jockeying for power, position, and privilege.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, as Walder and Gong noted, the *gongzilian* and other worker organisations were much more horizontal in structure, with individual leadership playing a much smaller role.

At the same time, workers and students also disagreed about strategy. From the very beginning, students assumed a posture of petitioning the Party, seeking to convince Party leaders to make concessions. To win the Party's trust, students even held banners with slogans like 'We Support the CCP' (拥护共产党) during marches. In contrast, a significant portion of the vocal and organised workers were much more hostile to the Party and argued for an insurrectionary strategy. The *gongzilian's* leaflets always called on people to rise up and overthrow the oppressors.

When disagreements about how to deal with the movement emerged among the CCP's top leadership in May, some students were inclined to cooperate with the 'moderate' leadership faction headed by Zhao Ziyang, then CCP General Secretary, against the 'hardliner' faction headed by Li Peng and Deng Xiaoping, the de facto supreme leader. For students, factional infighting among the CCP leadership provided leverage for the movement, which is why they firmly opposed the workers' call for a general strike, seeing such initiatives as 'instigating chaos', as one worker I interviewed recounted.<sup>19</sup>

However, the students' strategy did not make any sense to the workers, who saw Zhao Ziyang as a perfect example of a dictatorial bureaucrat who had used his power to make millions for his family during the reforms of the 1980s. They saw no difference between the moderate and the hardliner factions. The *gongzilian* argued that, if the movement sought cooperation with Party bureaucrats, only one thing would result: the movement would end up being appropriated by Party bureaucrats to advance their own interests, in a way similar to how Deng Xiaoping used the 1976 'April Fifth' Movement to strengthen his power.<sup>20</sup> The *gongzilian* believed that the only way for the movement to attain success was to build power through self-organising and self-arming until the Party bureaucracy could be overthrown. This is why its leaflets referenced the 1789 French Revolution in calling on the masses to 'storm the twentieth-century Bastille' (攻克二十世纪的巴士底狱).<sup>21</sup>

In this sense, one could argue that what transpired in 1989 was not one movement, but two. The student movement and the worker movement, though overlapping in time and place and somewhat related to each other, did not become one. Between students and workers there was little trust, insufficient communication, almost no strategic coordination, and only a very weak sense of mutual solidarity.

After 1989

The disconnect between students and workers during the movement foreshadowed their exceedingly divergent fates thereafter. The difference in the approaches the Party took towards students and workers was evident in the immediate aftermath of 1989: except for a few leaders, students were let go, whereas workers were violently prosecuted on a much wider scale.<sup>22</sup> This divergence remained pronounced during the 1990s.

The dramatic acceleration of market reforms in the 1990s provided ample economic opportunities for students who graduated from top universities in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some Chinese observers have noted that, through the high tide of marketisation, many student participants in the 1989 movement transformed into the new urban middle class that developed a vested interest in supporting the CCP regime.<sup>23</sup> In a sense, the economic reforms of the 1990s were a way for the CCP to absorb and coopt the generation of students who participated in 1989. I have talked to dozens of people who studied at Beijing's top universities in the late 1980s, almost all of whom participated in the movement. Today,

as middle-class residents of Beijing, they believe that ‘political stability trumps everything.’ They look back on their participation in 1989 as naive and manipulated.

Whereas the economic reforms of the 1990s greatly benefited intellectuals and students, they almost completely destroyed the urban working class. As the majority of state-owned enterprises were restructured, downsized, and privatised, workers lost jobs or faced much worse working conditions and meagre benefits and protections (see Hurst’s and Lee’s essays in the present volume). Scholars have generally attributed this wave of industrial restructuring to economic factors, but if we take 1989 into account, political considerations seem to have played a role as well. The power and radicalism of urban workers, as displayed in 1989, alarmed the Party leaders and made them determined to break down the urban working class.

The contrasting fates of the intellectuals who morphed into China’s new middle class on the one hand, and the urban working class on the other, have remained a feature of Chinese society since 1989. To this day, this class-based strategy of ‘divide and rule’—one of the most important legacies of 1989—remains crucial to sustaining the CCP regime.