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Hardening positions over Tibet and Western 'insults' to China threaten wider crisis

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## **The Beijing Olympic Games have been plunged into crisis.**

The protests following the Olympic torch on its global relay have revived international criticism of the policies of the Chinese regime in Tibet and on 'human rights abuses' (a deliberately vague term that means state repression). The reaction in China has been a wave of nationalism led by the state-controlled media to 'defend China's Olympics', as if the Games were not primarily a money-making opportunity for big corporate sponsors like Adidas, Samsung, Coca Cola and McDonald's, whose workers – in China and worldwide – will see none of the benefits.

The blame game that erupted after street protests in London, Paris and San Francisco has led to sharpening national tensions that could spill over into a wider economic and political conflict. In a disastrous miscalculation for all the organisers the 2008 Games have become the most politicised Games since Moscow in 1980. But whereas the boycott that year was led by Western governments, spearheaded by Jimmy Carter, Margaret Thatcher and eagerly supported by their 'friend' Deng Xiaoping (heralding the start of China's long march to the market), today's protests have developed from below. They have been led by grassroots organisations and have received very little support and encouragement (rather the opposite is true) at state level. The fact that the protests have been fairly small is proof that the organisers have largely operated in a 'headwind' with little media or establishment

backing – until now.

Western capitalist leaders have avoided criticism of China's misnamed 'communist' party (CCP) because their economies are so dependent on its anti-worker and anti-democratic policies, but also because as the saying goes: People who live in glasshouses shouldn't throw stones! Given what the world knows about the half a million people killed under the US occupation of Iraq, the Bush Administration is hardly in a position to pronounce judgement on the actions of other regimes. President Bush has noticeably not criticised the Chinese regime for its repression in Tibet (where reportedly 150 Tibetans and more than 20 Han Chinese have been killed since 14 March), or in China as a whole, urging Beijing instead to 'talk' to the Dalai Lama and show 'restraint'. Referring to Tibet, a top CCP leader was heard to say, "We have Bush behind us, so there won't be any problems," according to Xu Youyu of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. [From Dagens Nyheter, Sweden, 25 March 2008] This replicates the pattern from Taiwan in recent years, where Beijing and Washington have cooperated closely to restrain the outgoing government of pro-independence president Chen Shui-bian.

## **Protests from below**

Governments internationally have been more muted over Tibet than over the Chinese regime's links with Sudan and Burma, where military crackdowns have occurred, but where

the real focus of concern for overseas capitalism is China's growing economic and diplomatic clout in Africa and Southeast Asia. Even those concerns, however, have been played down because of the West's growing economic dependence on China. This reality was spelt out bluntly by the French Foreign Minister, Bernhard Kouchner, who was asked by *Le Monde* (29 March 2008) if his government's criticism over Tibet was 'limited' by China's economic power. "Indeed that makes things more difficult," Kouchner replied. "If Tibet wanted and had the means to buy EPR [French made] nuclear reactors, human rights would immediately be on a level footing with the CAC 40," he said referring to the Paris stock market's main index. French president Sarkozy is allegedly considering a 'boycott' of the Olympic opening ceremony, but this is an obvious ploy to rebuild his sinking support in opinion polls. When the same Sarkozy visited Beijing on a state visit last November, with a 30-strong delegation that included half his cabinet, the Minister for Human Rights was left behind in Paris! Sarkozy came away with €20 billion worth of Chinese government contracts.

Yet this smug and hugely profitable business arrangement between the various capitalist governments could now be upset by an upsurge of nationalist sentiment triggered by the Olympics. A recent opinion poll in the *Financial Times* (UK, 15 April 2008) revealed a major shift in attitudes in Europe, with people in Britain, France, Germany and Italy now seeing China as a bigger threat to global stability than the US. In the US, China was seen as a bigger threat than North Korea or Iran. This is also reflected in the US presidential race, always an opportunity for China-bashing, although this is usually toned down by the winner once elected. Especially Hillary Clinton, who is struggling to stay in the race, has rounded off on Bush's plan to attend the opening Olympic ceremony. A meeting between the White House envoy on Tibet, Paula Dobriansky, and the Dalai Lama, due to be held next week, could fur-

ther deepen the crisis. In India, the base of exile Tibetan leaders, Tibetan protesters may have the dubious pleasure of being 'supported' by the Hindu fundamentalist BJP, which vehemently opposes self-determination for the peoples of Kashmir, Assam and other parts of India, but hypocritically accuses Manmohan Singh's government of "blatant appeasement towards China".

The images beamed all over the world of a massive security cordon to shield the Olympic torch (or 'sacred flame' as the Chinese media call it), are a propaganda disaster for the organisers. A Paris police spokesman told *The Guardian* [UK, 8 April 2008] that the city's security operation, "was a bit like that put in place for George Bush". Such media images, especially the high profile and at times aggressive role of a squad from the elite 'Flying Dragons' unit of China's People's Armed Police (PAP) charged with guarding the torch, have done more to connect the issue of repression and lack of democratic rights in China and Tibet with the coming Olympics than any amount of lobbying and publicity by Tibetan exiles or Chinese human rights groups. In a fresh blow to the Chinese and IOC organisers, the footballer Diego Maradona pulled out of the torch relay in Buenos Aires, an unexpected move given Maradona's close links to Castro's Cuba and the government of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela – two regimes that have publicly supported China's military crackdown in Tibet.

### Hardening positions

At the time of writing positions are hardening. The Chinese dictatorship refuses to cancel the longest ever torch-relay (130 days) covering six continents, because this would be seen as a sign of weakness in the face of international pressure, a retreat that could seriously undermine the position of the one-party state. The various protest groups sense growing public support internationally,

but of course capitalist politicians are now jumping on the bandwagon for electoral reasons, using hypocritical and nationalist arguments. This shifting stance is because the ruling class, particularly in the dominant imperialist states, are alarmed by the Chinese regime's intransigence over Olympic-related issues and see this as a sign of a tougher stand in future over other – more important – economic and geo-political disputes.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) suddenly finds itself in the company of the G8, WTO and other symbols of corporate greed and power politics that are the target of protests. With strong working class parties in key countries it would be possible to issue an appeal for workers' unity against political and religious repression and capitalist exploitation globally. Unfortunately, given that none of the main groupings involved represent a working class or internationalist position, the debate surrounding the protests has assumed a nationalistic tone on all sides.

The demonstrations are universally described by the Western media as "anti-China" or "pro-China", lumping together the dictatorial regime and the masses it oppresses (often on behalf of US and other foreign companies). To many Chinese this appears to be a campaign against them as a people, traditionally looked down upon by racist Western rulers, and for this reason many at this stage are lining up on nationalist lines behind the CCP regime.

The fact that many spokesmen for the Free Tibet movement are Westerners, not Tibetans, also helps feed the propaganda of the CCP that the protests are organised by Western governments and the CIA, who exploit the Tibetan issue to attack China. As we have seen, the opposite is true. Not even the Dalai Lama and his bourgeois Tibetan exile government – who are desperate for negotiations with the Chinese regime – support the protests or the call for an Olympic boycott. The Dalai Lama confirmed recently that envoys of his government have entered into "private" talks with the Beijing regime

even as the clampdown in Tibet continues. President Hu Jintao demands that the Dalai Lama show "concrete action" in order for serious talks to take place. Beijing wants the Tibetan leader to distance himself even more categorically from the protests, and to urge his followers to cooperate with the authorities. This is not excluded in the coming period, but would provoke deep schisms within the Tibetan exile movement and further undermine a leadership that is heavily criticised for its conciliatory line.

### Are the Olympics 'non-political'?

The claim by the capitalist establishment everywhere that politics shouldn't be brought into sport is pure hypocrisy! China's opening to the West under Mao Zedong in 1971 began with the decision to allow the US national table tennis team to play in China. Today, backed into a corner over Tibet in particular, the Chinese regime is using the issue of the Olympics as part of a highly political gambit. It has given massive publicity to the allegedly anti-Chinese slant of the Olympic protests to create the idea that China is under attack and must defend itself. Chinese nationalism has deep roots as a result of the crimes committed by Western and Japanese imperialism in the past. But a closer look at the regime's policies exposes the hypocrisy of its current position. The CCP has dismantled the country's once extensive welfare system (free health care, cheap public housing, free schooling) and the bureaucratically planned economy that financed these reforms, in order to embrace capitalist economics and massive amounts of foreign capital. 50,000 US companies operate from inside China and receive massive handouts from the CCP regime in the form of tax breaks, subsidised land, and cheap labour. Why on earth should workers and peasants in China 'defend' this, or the other capitalist policies of the present regime?

The CCP regime's strategic alliance with foreign capital is embodied in the Beijing Olym-

pics. The Olympics is a corporate sporting spectacle, the main role of which is to make huge profits for its sponsors and the media and construction industries. It offers little for working people other than a temporary distraction from the hard grind of economic survival. The torch relay which has been transformed by the Chinese regime into a symbol of Chinese 'honour' actually began life at the 1936 Berlin Olympics as a symbol of Nazi triumphalism. It has nothing whatsoever to do with internationalism or harmonious relations. The Chinese regime's decision to route the march through Tibet (including a plan to scale Mount Everest), Xinjiang and Taiwan cannot be described as 'non-political'. Such lavish publicity stunts are the hallmark of ruling elites everywhere that want to show their strength and deflect popular attention from the real issues: jobs, low wages, deadly pollution and surging food prices.

Half the world's population will 'boycott' this year's Olympics in the sense that they are too poor to get to a television or to stop working. The specially-built Beijing National Stadium – or 'Bird's Nest' – can hold a maximum of 91,000 spectators, or 0.00007 percent of China's population. Despite the fact their city is one of the richest in China, most citizens of Beijing cannot afford a ticket to the arena, where the best seats will be occupied by wealthy foreigners and the Chinese elite. The stadium has cost 3.5 billion yuan (350 million euros) to build. Meanwhile 260 million people in China, including many Tibetans and other minorities, have no access to safe drinking water. Beijing itself faces a severe water shortage as a result of desertification in northern China and depletion of the underground aquifer. To 'solve' this problem for the three weeks that foreign journalists, athletes and tourists are in the city for the Games, the city of Beijing has been allowed to drain the neighbouring province of Hebei of its water reserves, prompting protests from industrialists and farmers there.

The 2008 Olympics is intended to celebrate this 'New China', a key player in the process of capitalist globalisation, but where the wealth gap is now more extreme than in Russia or India. China has 106 dollar billionaires, only the USA has more. Yet 300 million people still live on less than one dollar (7 yuan) per day, the World Bank's definition of absolute poverty. For the vast majority of China's still poor population what's needed is struggle and organisation – not extravagant nationalist and corporate pageants!

### Clash of nationalisms

By portraying all criticism of its policies as an 'attack on' and 'attempt to split' China, the CCP has succeeded temporarily in mobilising public support, especially from the urban middle classes and sections of the Chinese community living abroad. Not for thirty years has such anti-Western rhetoric been used by the Chinese media, who for decades have rather tried to emulate and covet all things Western. Even regime critics and sections of the Chinese left have been swept along to some extent by this nationalist wave. The CCP is copying the propaganda of Bush and the US Republicans, who falsely portrayed all opposition to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars as 'anti-American' and 'pro-terror'. The results – further down the line – can be similar in the sense of massive disillusionment and anger against a government that lies to its people. But this policy also entails huge risks for an escalation of Chinese nationalism and a global backlash in the form of anti-China nationalism opportunistically whipped up by politicians.

The bourgeois media internationally is once again trumpeting "Western values" as against Asia's "authoritarian capitalism", as if the former did not exploit and rest upon the latter. Police forces outside China have arrested almost as many Tibetan protesters in recent weeks as Chinese security forces (although of course their subsequent treatment will not be the same). In London, it was

reported that police even arrested youth wearing 'Free Tibet' tee-shirts – so much for freedom of speech!

Right-wing commentators imply that democratic rights are intrinsic to Judeo-Christian capitalist societies. This is nonsense! Historically, the European capitalist states ruled much of Asia using similar methods to those the Chinese regime uses today: There were no free elections in Hong Kong under British rule, for example, or in Tibet which was invaded and occupied by British troops from 1904 until the Second World War. Most of Europe did not enjoy universal suffrage until after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917, which forced the capitalists elsewhere to institute far-reaching reforms for fear of revolt. History has shown that the ultimate guarantor of basic democratic rights is a strong organised workers' movement. These rights are increasingly coming under attack in Western countries especially since the start of the 'war on terror', and can only be maintained by sustained working class struggle and ultimately by overthrowing capitalism and replacing it with a democratic socialist society.

Unless steps are taken to diffuse the Olympic crisis, this could mark the beginning of a new 'Cold War' between rival capitalist camps. Within the regime-sanctioned 'pro-China' camp, as seen by their big demonstration in San Francisco on 9 April, an assortment of right-wing nationalists, fascists, Kuomintang supporters and mafia – no friends of the Chinese working class – are seizing this opportunity to extend their influence. A veteran of the 1989 Beijing events was physically attacked and called a 'traitor' by pro-regime Chinese at the San Francisco demonstration for a tee-shirt saying 'Don't forget Tiananmen'. In Australia, Chinese organisations that are mobilising to 'defend' the Olympic torch on 24 April have had to order extra stocks of Chinese national flags as local supplies have been exhausted. The official 2008 Olympic slogan, 'One world, one dream', has become a joke! Meanwhile

within the Tibetan national movement advocates of independence as opposed to the 'greater autonomy' espoused by the Dalai Lama are gaining ground as the repression intensifies.

## Lessons from anti-Japan protests

As the anti-Japan street protests in 2005 showed, however, the Chinese regime can move to diffuse the protests and lock down the nationalist internet chorus when this begins to pose a threat to its export markets and foreign investments. In today's precarious environment the threats to China's economy are even more serious. No large economy is more dependent on global markets than China. Another – even greater – threat to the Chinese regime is posed by the super-exploited working class, which could seize the opportunity to go on strike for wage increases and other improvements against the foreign capitalists who own a quarter of China's industry (although these companies are heavily enmeshed with 'national' Chinese capital). In April-May 2005, 40,000 workers in Dalian and 12,000 in Shenzhen, downed tools against their Japanese bosses. Among their demands were free trade unions and while they did not win this crucial demand, the strikes secured substantial economic concessions.

A campaign is now underway in China for a boycott of French goods following the 'insult' delivered by French politicians (ironically including the Communist Party, which runs the city of Paris together with the Socialist Party and Greens), and the perceived attack on Chinese paralympic athlete, Jin Jing. She has been dubbed the "angel in a wheelchair" by Chinese media and given star status after she fought off an attempt to seize the Olympic torch by a Paris protester. But this boycott campaign is reactionary, and says a lot about which social classes are most vocal in the current debate inside China. Nine-tenths of Chinese people cannot afford to buy French wine or Louis Vuitton handbags, so

in that sense they are already 'boycotting' these goods. Internet activists are also calling for a nationwide boycott of Carrefour, the biggest foreign retailer in China. But this campaign – if successful – will mainly hurt the company's 40,000 Chinese employees rather than Carrefour's French bosses.

Compare this stance to when 3,000 workers in Sichuan province last July fought a bitter struggle against the French cement multinational Lafarge, which carried out huge redundancies at the former state-owned Shuangma cement factory, near Jiangyou City. There were no calls from the nationalists for a boycott of French goods at that time. Then, a 2,000-strong contingent of the same paramilitary police (PAP) that today guards the Olympic flame and suppresses Tibetan demonstrators, was used to crush the workers' two-week strike. One 25-year old woman worker committed suicide in protest against the French company and its Chinese state heavies. Unlike today's Olympic protests, or Tibet's riots, the protests in Sichuan were never reported in the state media.

## Tibet – What's the solution?

As socialists have warned the Chinese regime is using events in Tibet, and now the Olympic protests, to garner public support for its much greater use of repression and to silence all criticism of its anti-poor policies. From a propaganda standpoint the regime was helped enormously by the attacks on Han Chinese and Hui Muslim civilians during the 14 March riots. There is unfortunately a high risk for inter-ethnic violence under a regime that outlaws self-organisation by the masses, especially by the working class. There is a Chinese saying: "Kill the chicken to scare the monkey"! Today an example is being made of the Tibetans, but the message – "obey or be crushed!" – is aimed particularly at the huge working class of China. It should be remembered that in March 1989 Hu Jintao, then party boss in Tibet, organ-

ised a military crackdown in Tibet with hundreds killed. Three months later the same methods were used – with even greater bloodshed – against the workers and youth of Beijing.

The repression in Tibet follows a pattern from other mass protests that pose a challenge to the power and authority of the Chinese government. The Shanwei massacre on 6 December 2005 in Guangdong province is a case in point. Officially, three villagers were shot dead for protesting against the construction of a high-polluting power plant. Local residents say 13 were killed and accuse the authorities of hiding corpses and terrorising villagers as part of a cover-up. All the victims in Shanwei were Han Chinese. These images were never shown on state television, unlike the footage of rioting Tibetans which has been shown almost daily for several weeks. In fact, the Tibetan events are the only case of political unrest to be shown on television, in a country where according to official figures, riots, burning of police cars, and other acts of violence, occur on an almost weekly basis. Seven protesters and one policeman were reportedly killed in March in anti-pollution protests in Fujian province, for example. News of these events – in which no Tibetans took part – has of course been completely blacked out.

The protests demanding religious and political rights in Tibet, echoed in recent weeks by protests in other Western regions and in the majority Turkic-speaking province of Xinjiang, have met with great sympathy from working people and youth internationally. This has nothing to do with the stand of the capitalist classes in these countries who do not give a damn for the plight of the Chinese or Tibetan peoples, providing their own profits are safeguarded. The retort of the Chinese regime and other nationalists that most people abroad have never been to Tibet and don't know the real situation there is largely irrelevant. Most of the 30 million people who demonstrated against the US war in Iraq in 2003 had not been to Iraq or the US, but

recognised military aggression when they saw it.

The Tibetan conflict has been pushed to the fore of people's consciousness around the world, helped by a series of miscalculations on the part the Chinese regime. But this conflict cannot be solved on a capitalist basis. No amount of repression by the CCP regime will reconcile the majority of Tibetans to the conditions they experience today. But neither do the bourgeois leadership of the Tibetan struggle in exile and the assortment of mostly religiously motivated 'friends of Tibet' offer any way forward. With increasingly heavy-handed measures from Beijing's side, there are now warning signs that a section of the Tibetan youth especially could be driven in the direction of individual terrorism. Socialists oppose this as a fundamentally flawed method of struggle that will only give the Chinese state an excuse for greater repression, while making a united struggle alongside the Han Chinese workers and peasants more difficult. Liberation from dictatorship and national oppression can only be achieved through democratically controlled and organised mass struggle, based above all on the forces of the working class.

### 'Capitalism is the enemy'

The Tibetan and Han Chinese communities have lived in close interaction for centuries. Many Tibetan households revere Mao Zedong for his role in ending feudalism and improving social conditions, although his ham-fisted bureaucratic methods – the only methods available to a Stalinist dictatorship – also alienated many. The current conflict however is not just a re-run of the clashes in 1959 or 1989 (for more background: see our article *Tibet and the National Question*). The development of capitalism in Tibet has aggravated social tensions to the extreme, as the majority of Tibetans (75% of whom live in rural areas) have missed out from the last decade's economic boom. Rather than primarily an issue of religious, linguistic and

national freedom, although these are also important issues, the recent unrest was a backlash against the growing domination of the Tibetan economy by wealthier Han Chinese and even Hui, while Tibetans are economically marginalised. "Capitalism is identified as the enemy," exclaimed Pankaj Mishra in the *Guardian Weekly* (UK, 28 March 2008) in one of the few Western reports to hit the mark.

Socialists defend the right of the Tibetan people to decide their own future, up to and including the right to independence. But there is great polarisation in Tibet, between ethnic communities and even among the Tibetan people themselves. The Beijing regime has groomed a substantial layer of Tibetan officials and academics who fear for their privileges and positions if the Dalai Lama's government is allowed to return as part of a negotiated settlement, and fear the masses even more. While for the exile government the 'middle way' of greater autonomy within China is no longer a 'tactic', but expresses the desire of these former feudal masters to become capitalist stakeholders in a booming tourist 'Shangri La' financed by big infusions of capital from Beijing. Unbeknown to most outside capitalist commentators there are in fact two rival Tibetan bourgeois elites, one internal and one external, with the Lhasa-based elite even more hostile to a deal with the Dalai Lama than the CCP tops in Beijing.

The working class in China, Tibet and internationally must take an independent position from all the national bourgeois camps in this dispute – clearly opposing racism and national chauvinism, and standing for working class unity and internationalism. Concretely, the masses in Tibet need to link their struggle for basic democratic rights, an end to state repression, and democratic control over the economy, to the unfolding struggle of the working class and peasantry throughout China.

This movement must fight for:

- An end to one-party rule and state repression
- For freedom of assembly, freedom of speech and religious worship
- For the right to organise, to build independent trade unions, peasant associations and political parties, including the all-important need for a fighting workers' party
- An end to privatisations and neo-liberal attacks. Nationalise all major companies – foreign and Chinese-owned – under democratic workers' control and management. For a genuine socialist plan of production based on elected factory committees, rural associations and other popular organs. End the privileges of state officials.
- The right to self-determination for the Tibetan people and other minorities, while recognising that capitalism and national oppression (imperialism) can only be overcome through international socialist struggle, with the aim of establishing a democratic and voluntary socialist federation of China and other Asian states as part of a world socialist federation

For further reading:

Tibet erupts (26 March 2008):

<http://www.chinaworker.info/en/content/news/391/>

Tibet and the National Question

(22 September 2005):

<http://www.chinaworker.info/en/content/news/400/>