

Xinjiang - Neither Washington nor Beijing: the Left Must Stand With the Uighurs

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An advert posted in November 2019 alerted employers across China to a lucrative opportunity. "1000 ethnic minorities" from Xinjiang were available for hire in batches of 100 or more. "Semi-military style management" under "government-appointed cadres" assured their compliance. Prospective employers could even "apply for police to be stationed 24 hours a day for in-factory management". The agent guaranteed "no loss of personnel" for the duration of the one-year contract.

Methodical persecution.

The Uighur people, and other Turkic majority-Muslim ethnic minorities in China's north-western Xinjiang province, have long faced discrimination. But in recent years, the Chinese state has escalated extraordinary, methodical persecution.

Xinjiang has become an intensely-surveilled police state, with ubiquitous facial recognition CCTV; pervasive checkpoints at which ethnic minorities are singled out and harassed; compulsory spyware on phones; and officials invading and inspecting homes for 'suspicious' behaviours including religious and cultural expression. The oceans of resulting data are [integrated to monitor the entire population](#) and [algorithmically identify candidates](#) for [interrogation or detention](#) in "re-education" concentration camps.

Likely more than a million have been incarcerated in these camps. First, the government denied them, then presented them as voluntary "vocational training centres". Former detainees and [leaked state documents describe](#) torture, sexual assault, and a programme intended to culturally, religiously and linguistically Sinicise ethnic minorities, and to inculcate political loyalty. Their children are [taken to boarding schools and orphanages](#), where they are taught Han culture and Communist party of China (CCP) slogans.

The [next step](#) has been to transfer minority workers to coercive labour placements within Xinjiang and across China. The advert above is just one example. There, ["patriotic" re-education](#) and intense surveillance continue. [Researchers](#) and [journalists](#) have connected the factories to the supply chains of dozens of global brands, from Nike and H&M to Amazon and Apple.

Now, [chilling survivor testimony](#) and [analysis of government statistics](#) show a new mass effort to impose involuntary contraception and sterilisation on women. Suppressing an ethnic group's birth rates meets [the UN's definition of genocide](#).

A 'People's War on Terror'?

Beijing claims it is battling Islamist extremism. It adopted this framing [shortly after 9/11](#) and has borrowed and developed [methods from Western powers](#), even declaring a "People's War on Terror". What's the real motive?

The issue is sometimes discussed as one of straightforward religious persecution. But [Rachel Harris notes](#) that secular Uighurs are targeted too, while other Muslims in China such as the Hui are treated differently (though they too face [rising Islamophobia](#)).

Darren Byler and Carolina Sanchez Boe describe it as an example of "[terror capitalism](#)". Building surveillance infrastructure and exploiting forced labour create opportunities for corporate profit. Beijing is eager to maintain control over a territory [rich in fossil fuels](#) and [minerals](#), which grows a [significant proportion](#) of the world's cotton. And Xinjiang is a [vital artery](#) into central Asian and Middle Eastern markets and ports in China's efforts to compete as an economic superpower.

The Uighurs' distinct cultural and linguistic identity as a people is a potential threat to Beijing's grip. Xinjiang ('new frontier') is a modern name for a region that has been in and out of Chinese imperial influence for centuries. Many Uighurs consider it Uighuristan or East Turkestan - the latter the name of two short-lived republics in the region before its final annexation in 1949.

This helps explain the determination to control distinctive elements of Uighur culture, and the decades-long efforts to increase Han migration to Xinjiang. Forcible assimilation and demographic engineering guard against aspirations to national self-determination.

These material drives are intertwined with state ethno-nationalism. Echoing European colonial attitudes, the supposedly 'backward' Uighurs benefit from 'civilising' Han influence. State media openly boasts that re-education transforms them into 'modern' citizens including via [hygiene](#) and basic socialisation. Government programmes send officials to [visit and stay](#) in Uighur families' homes - to spy while teaching them state policy and Han culture. Even the [layout of Uighur homes is policed](#) to reflect Han lifestyles. Propaganda has [dramatically intensified](#) anti-Uighur racism among Han.

Neither Washington nor Beijing.

Our own hawkish nationalist politicians have begun campaigning about the Uighurs. It is, of course, cynical posturing. For UK and European rightwingers, US Republicans (and Biden Democrats) and Indian Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) politicians, the issue serves as a stick with which to beat a rival and shore up support for an escalating Cold War. Obviously, none of these racists care about anti-Muslim persecution. [John Bolton revealed](#) that Donald Trump privately encouraged Chinese president Xi Jinping, and [Trump confirmed](#) he stalled sanctions for the sake of a better trade deal.

But, despite ulterior motives and unreliability, their campaigns have given real help to the Uighurs. Magnitsky sanctions are targeting [key officials](#) and [state organs](#). Republican Josh Hawley is [proposing a bill](#) forcing corporations to publicly audit their supply chains and root out forced labour. Many Uighur exiles, fearing for their families and people, have understandably welcomed the assistance.

The international left cannot duck out just because Western powers criticise China. We cannot support our enemy's enemy, uncritically regurgitating its propaganda [as the Morning Star shamefully does](#). But nor can we ally with our imperialist rulers.

We must think about alliances and action independent of the ruling classes. We must reaffirm the left's understanding of the transnational working class, and oppressed peoples, as their own emancipators. In the tradition of [consistent anti-imperialism](#), we must look to build a 'third camp' that makes links and solidarity across borders, opposing all our rulers and exploiters. As inter-imperialist tensions escalate into a new Cold War, update the old slogan: "Neither Washington nor Beijing, but international socialism".

For instance, despite harsh repression, class struggle in China continues to [seethe with unofficial disputes and strikes](#). Far from uniformly anathematising (or idolising) the entire nation, let's seek to reach out to this potent force of Chinese workers against the state and ruling class.

Building international solidarity.

The [Uyghur Solidarity Campaign UK](#), with which I'm an activist, has been formed to build solidarity in the workers' movement and the left in the UK. The campaign has protested monthly at the Chinese embassy with London's Uighur community (resuming this week after a coronavirus-hiatus), and in March we [invaded the Oxford Circus flagships of Nike, H&M and Microsoft](#) to protest forced labour. A [solidarity motion](#) passed at Labour conference last year; a range of [union branches](#) and PCS have joined the protests; and socialist MPs including [John McDonnell](#), [Kate Osamor](#) and [Nadia Whittome](#) have got on board.

There's much more for the campaign to do in terms of alliance-building, protest, and direct action. There are also clear international connections to make around anti-racism, state violence and reproductive freedom.

A particular goal of the campaign is worker action. From trade union history - [Lancashire textile workers](#) rejecting slave-picked Confederate cotton in the US civil war, [Scottish factory workers](#) grounding Pinochet's jet engines, [French and Italian dockers](#) refusing to move Saudi arms in 2019 - we know capitalism's global supply chains provide avenues for concrete action. Organised workers in businesses connected to surveillance and forced labour in China, from dockers to programmers to shop assistants, could have huge leverage.

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P.S.

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