

Socialists Should Support the Popular Resistance in China

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People in China are taking mass action to challenge authoritarian rule, capitalist exploitation, and a deadly lockdown policy. Socialists around the world can work in solidarity to support this movement. Here's how.

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The current protests in China signal one of the largest mass mobilizations in the country since the Tiananmen movement of 1989. The immediate trigger is a fire on the night of November 24 that killed at least 10 people, who were mostly Uyghurs, and injured many others in a residential building in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. The tragedy occurred because firefighters could not reach the building in time as residents were trapped. This is a consequence of Xinjiang's lockdown regime, which has trapped many residents in their homes for over 100 days — one of the most stringent lockdown measures in the whole country.

Discontent against China's pandemic lockdown policy has been simmering for a long time. Local actions, many led by workers resisting the uneven and draconian lockdown policies across different cities, have occurred almost since the beginning of the pandemic. In October, a lone [protester](#) appeared at a busy intersection in Beijing with banners, calling for Chinese citizens to engage in mass action — striking at school and at work — to create pressure for an end to forced lockdown measures and an expansion of democratic rights. And just days before the current protests, Zhengzhou Foxconn workers, many denied access to basic necessities and working in forced labor conditions due to a combination of Foxconn's labor practices and regional lockdown guidelines, protested against management.

The hallmark of dissent in China, however, is that such localized efforts are usually not allowed to consolidate into anything like an independent movement, one that could articulate connections between social issues and build organization across sectors or regions.

Until this past weekend. The incident at Urumqi catalyzed citywide protests, autonomously and anonymously coordinated over social media. This quickly triggered a nerve across other Chinese cities, whose citizens have long harbored dissatisfaction with each of their own cities' lockdown measures, and in overseas communities, which quickly called for vigils for the victims in Urumqi. Nearly overnight, protests and other civil obedience actions have spread across China.

The political content of these protests remain highly undeveloped and inchoate, but one thing is clear: this rare moment represents a shift in the political consciousness of the Chinese people.

People are engaging in independent action nationwide to change material conditions in one of the

two largest capitalist superpowers in the global economy, and for that reason alone, socialists should extend our solidarity. The key for us is to amplify and synthesize the best of the demands emerging on the ground, build overseas infrastructures of solidarity, and echo the protesters' call for basic democratic rights. We must do all this while articulating additional demands for socialist democracy alongside the people themselves. This is a critical moment for socialists to help deepen the calls for systemic reform on the ground and to explain the capitalist nature of Chinese authoritarianism.

What's Happening in These Protests?

Due to the absence of independent political organizations, Chinese citizens are accustomed to expressing dissent anonymously through social media channels like Weibo, Telegram, and other platforms. Many local wildcat actions have been organized in this way.

The past weekend saw this method of organizing spread to an unprecedented scale and tested its limits: countless new public and anonymous discussion and organizing group chats formed to coordinate protests and demands. Opposition to the lockdown policies united the country, but nearly all other aspects of the nascent movement continue to be debated. Anonymous activists on the streets in Telegram group chats, in the comment section of livestreams, and among the diaspora are constantly debating about strategy and tactics. Should the deaths at Urumqi be politicized at all? Should we call simply for reforms to the lockdown regime or demand more radical change to the Chinese political system itself? In Beijing, some protesters are [demanding](#) "a democratic, free, and open communist party," while others in [Shanghai](#) are calling for the overthrow of the party-state. Urumqi protests began with activists surrounding government buildings to demand accountability. By Saturday night, students began self-organizing on campuses. One of the first and largest gatherings occurred at a university in [Nanjing](#), and medical students in Wuhan released one of the first organized public [statements](#) in support of the protests.

The key demand to abolish lockdown measures should not be confused with the far-right COVID-denialist protests in the West. Most protesters are not against pandemic control per se. The demands target the Chinese government's particular brand of lockdown measures, and there is no proof of widespread COVID denialism as the protests' main animating factor. On the contrary, most footage of the protests show participants wearing masks, and many discussions focus on how a more responsible and accountable approach toward pandemic control can be built.

Currently, there is no mechanism for democratic input on how such policies should be crafted and implemented, and often the measures have been implemented to the detriment of citizens' health. China's lockdown policies have been highly uneven and heavily mismanaged, and often aimed at severely constraining the movements of citizens without providing access to basic necessities. Masses of people, some uninfected, have been forcibly transferred by the police into large makeshift hospitals — a move much criticized by medical authorities. As the Urumqi tragedy demonstrates, local governments implement ill-planned lockdowns while state agencies continuously neglect to provide accurate data on case counts and deaths. Many citizens have been arbitrarily trapped in their homes and have to rely on online mutual aid and friendship networks to provide for daily necessities.

Furthermore, the recent Foxconn incident showed that the fundamental logic of these lockdown measures aims not at protecting people's well-being, but at strengthening control over the laboring population to maintain the productive capacity of China's capitalist industries.

Foxconn employs a "closed-loop system," approved by local government, to trap workers in the factory complex in the name of pandemic control. Workers are forced to work more to satisfy the

heightened production quota for Apple's new iPhones. Many work without adequate housing conditions and even access to three meals a day. Some have had their personal belongings thrown away when infected and put under isolation.

When masses of workers broke out recently from the factory complex to flee on foot, the local government in [Henan](#) sent party cadres to act as scabs to fill in Foxconn's production line. When newly-hired workers protested, the local government dispatched hundreds of riot police to assist Foxconn in suppressing them.

The state response to these workers' struggles foreshadowed the repression already present in today's nationwide protests. Reports of police attacking and detaining protesters in Shanghai, where demands calling for the overthrow of Xi Jinping and the Chinese government first surfaced, have gained the most traction. Within minutes, new Telegram group chats were organized publicly to build solidarity campaigns for Shanghai. Some of these chats quickly turned into discussion spaces for political strategy beyond the city.

Attempts at censorship and repression continue to spread. Plainclothes state agents have been spotted in the protests. Workers in some state-owned enterprises have reported that management is forbidding them from liking or resharing news of the protests online. And as expected, China's extensive surveillance regime, [strengthened](#) by the contact-tracing pandemic control technologies in personal devices, has allowed state authorities to track down people who attend protests.

The global reach of online spaces also allowed overseas communities to respond rapidly. Vigils have been organized across many major cities in the world. People are debating what demands and actions to rally around in real time, and some discussions have erupted into open conflict. For example, at Amsterdam's [vigil](#), some Han Chinese protesters confronted overseas Uyghurs, who were waving the East Turkestan flag, and criticized them for stirring up separatism, while other Han Chinese protesters supported the Uyghurs' presence at the gathering. Such instances further reveal the political diversity of the protests, as they provided an occasion for local and overseas Chinese to engage in frank debate about what political change should look like in China.

What Can Socialists Do?

There are essentially no publicly-organized independent socialist organizations in China. And state infiltration has historically been rampant in any underground movement spaces, especially on the left. Openly independent left-wing formations beyond state and market socialists are prioritized for repression. Local protests, like wildcat strikes, [are often tolerated](#), but afterwards, rank-and-file organizers and left-wing militants agitating in such spaces are quietly disappeared and silenced with cold efficiency. In 1952, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rounded up the entire Trotskyist movement under bogus charges and many either perished in prisons or remained imprisoned for decades. More recently, Maoist student [radicals](#) were heavily suppressed after their solidarity mobilization with workers at the JASIC factory in Shenzhen.

This does not preclude opportunities for solidarity abroad, but it does compel socialist organizations abroad to think more creatively, and with caution, about how international solidarity should be conducted. Active socialists from the Chinese diaspora often participate in more informal or non-public spaces, or in more broad-tent and less ideologically cohesive organizations. Formal exchanges between socialist organizations is important, when possible, but authoritarian conditions demand flexibility. Socialists should not be dogmatic about questions of organizational form and expression, but must adapt to existing conditions in order to sustain the longer-term goal of building and learning from the people and, ultimately, changing reality itself.

For example, a key locus of mass political activity is in the numerous group chats first promoted by the @citizensdaily account on social media on Telegram. Other progressive overseas Chinese and other diaspora activists interested in China issues organize in relatively young and developing platforms like [Not Your Little Pink](#), [Dove and Crane Collective](#), and [Students for Hong Kong](#). Socialists should support these initiatives and platforms, without treating them instrumentally as a base for recruitment or attempting to take them over (though of course we should build our own independent political spaces and programs as well). We must learn from these activists' experiences and defend their autonomy. At the same time, we should try to synthesize the best of their demands into a socialist platform which can connect these communities' autonomous spaces with our socialist organizations.

For instance, the people in China are coalescing around a demand for the restoration of basic democratic rights — which we must amplify. But in doing so, socialists can underscore that the CCP's one-party dictatorship structure is necessarily tied to its capitalist system. A thorough restoration of freedom of expression, self-determination, and independent organization of people in China requires replacing existing state institutions with those of socialist democracy.

As the late Chinese Marxist [Wang Fanxi](#) put it, socialist democracy defends a multi-party system that includes “democratic rights ... already won by people under the bourgeois democratic system” — but goes beyond it by doing away with bureaucrats and capitalists' hold over the means of production. The ultimate goal is restoring political power to the working class in the form of a democratically-planned economy.

In practice, promoting a vision of socialist democracy means amplifying transitional demands that bridge between the platforms of local and overseas movement as they exist on the one hand and our vision on the other: strengthening demands for independent workers' power, for example, and defending the right to self-determination by Uyghurs, Tibetans, Hongkongers, and other ethnic groups in China who demand it.

Ultimately, realizing these demands together is impossible within the limits of bourgeois democracy. The real work for socialists is to organize among the broader population in such a way that the diverse movement can come to these ideas on their own terms.

Moreover, the tensions between U.S. and China are no excuse for socialists in the U.S. to abandon solidarity and engagement with communities resisting authoritarianism. The power of local and overseas coordination this week shows that the slogan “the main enemy is at home” simply breaks down, as [Vincent Wong](#) puts it, when one considers migrant populations as part of the social movement in the imperial core. Wong writes:

“Migrant communities do not have the privilege of thinking only about what happens in one place and centering their local enemies in every situation. Members of those communities have family, friends, loved ones, colleagues, and comrades back in their countries of origin who are often in struggle against authoritarianism, capitalist exploitation, military aggression, and ultranationalist forces there.”

For communities who are barred from expressing dissent in their home countries, movement spaces in the imperial core often serve as the main site for raising demands as an independent opposition and building mass organizations.

How can socialist organizations start practically showing solidarity with these perspectives in mind? Here are a few ideas:

- Self-educate by following journalists and social media accounts in touch with on-the-ground updates, such as @whyoutouzhele and @renminwansui5 on Twitter, @citizensdailydn and @northern_square on Instagram, and overseas organizations like [Not Your Little Pink, Dove and Crane Collective](#), [Uyghur Collective](#), and [Students for Hong Kong](#).
- Uplift the struggles of Uyghurs and non-Han ethnic groups in Xinjiang, who have faced disproportionate oppression from the Chinese state. DSA Muslim's co-sponsored campaign from last year, "[30 Day Pledge to #BoycottGenocide](#)," which targets companies complicit in using Uyghur forced labor, is a good example.
- Produce educational materials for local chapters and ally organizations that reshapes and amplifies demands by protesters closest to our own politics. In particular, amplify any socialist or left-wing groups that have [already begun to synthesize](#) some of these slogans.
- Combat reactionary disinformation — especially from pro-state propaganda outlets targeting the Western left — that seek to selectively explain or even misrepresent the protesters' demands. [Dongsheng News](#), for instance, is being promoted by the likes of [Breakthrough News](#) to deny the connection between the lockdown measures and the deaths at Foxconn and mass discontent. The goal seems to be to absolve the government of responsibility.
- Support campaigns against labor abuses in China that complement the current protests, and especially those that directly link to U.S. corporations' role in labor abuse. Such campaigns can provide effective sites for concrete agitation for socialists in the U.S. The campaign against [Foxconn](#), which directly addresses the alliance between Apple and Chinese state capitalism, is a good example. Help connect U.S.-based and international trade unions and other labor organizations with the overseas diaspora to further develop each others' campaigns.
- Cultivate formal relationships with Uyghur, Chinese, Hongkonger, and other diaspora organizations on the frontlines of mobilizing solidarity efforts. Not to embrace their every demand, but to help advance socialist critiques of Chinese authoritarian capitalism in community with them. In addition, organize contingents to show up in solidarity at their events and vigils.
- Help circulate stories and reports of missing and detained individuals from the protests, and organize for the rights of Chinese dissident refugees in broader migrant justice movements in the U.S.

Solidarity with Chinese protesters is not limited to these suggestions, of course, and socialists should continue to brainstorm new ideas with the diaspora.

International solidarity is a cornerstone of the socialist movement, and those in the Global North with resources have a unique responsibility. The left does not hold state power, and such efforts may be limited, but the risk of not trying at all would be ceding the ground to the hawkish "anti-China" U.S. establishment and allowing them to co-opt mass struggles in China. The U.S. right has long found allies within anti-CCP diaspora organizations in support of the expansion of U.S. imperialist power. Socialists must work to sever this link. Although it is important, exclusively campaigning against the "new cold war" — with no concrete alternative rallying points for the diaspora or critique of the authoritarian regime — is not enough. Supporting the movement for democracy in China requires having a clear critique of the nature of authoritarian capitalism there.

This is an exciting moment for the international socialist movement. Popular resistance to capitalism and authoritarianism is growing in one of the most strategically important countries in the world. As ever, our solidarity and active support belong with that progressive and popular movement.

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P.S.

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