
The Fourth May Incident of 1919 and China's Working Class Movement Thereafter

Atreya Bhatta

Link : https://santiniketansahityapath.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/7_Atreya-Bhatta.pdf

Abstract: The May Fourth movement was a significant issue in the history of China. Much has been done about the intellectual movements associated with the May Fourth movement. Little attention has been paid to the dissent of the working class of China that followed the movement. In the current paper an assessment has been made to analyze the movement of China's working class which followed the May Fourth movement.

Key words: May Fourth Movement, Workers' dissent.

Some Preliminary Remarks:

In 1911 the Qinghai revolution of overthrowing the monarchy and substituting it with a republic seemed to be an epochal change in the history of China. In reality the change was more superficial than real. The overthrowing of the alien Manchu rulers seemed to have played the most important factor in precipitating the revolution. There was very little attempt to alter the basic nature of the Chinese society and economy in general which might have effected the actual establishment of the republic. Several features of the Chinese socio-politico-economic infrastructure which existed prior to the revolution of 1911 (the central authorities' little or no effective control over the provinces, an economy that was largely dominated by foreign ventures and failed to achieve any sustained growth, bureaucratic corruption, militarists rising to prominence particularly in the provinces) remained largely the same. Added to it were the vicissitudes amongst the revolutionaries themselves. As a result immediately after the overthrow of the monarchy, China appeared to have entered a new stage. Soon all hopes of a new order were lost in quicksand to political quagmire, economic dislocation, foreign encroachment, central authorities diminishing control over the provinces and warlordism. After the dissolution of the empire in 1911, the nominal republic, which was instituted, could not provide a new viable political system. A military leader named Yuan Shikai emerged as a strong man in a very chaotic China. Meanwhile the Japanese government issued the Twenty-One Demands on January 18th, 1915. Effectively this called for colonization of most of the key areas in China. After a lot of negotiations, Yuan Shikai yielded to the Japanese demands on May 9th, 1915. The Chinese people's response was sharp and indignant. Soon Yuan Shikai launched his monarchical movements. Yuan Shikai's dreams to become the emperor ended when he died in 1916. But he was succeeded by lot many militarists contending for power. In this particular chaotic situation the common people were the worst affected. They reacted to this situation in various forms of dissent which ultimately culminated in a massive civil war. In this paper an attempt will be made to analyze the nature of dissent of a particular section of society the working class which was reflected in a particular period of time around 1919.

The Unrest On MAY 4th , 1919

On May 4, 1919, the news reached Beijing that at the Versailles Peace Conference it was decided that the former German bases and rights in Shandong will be handed over to Japan. Public indignation ran high in China and an unprecedented wave of political agitation swept the entire country. Three thousand students marched in front of the Tiananmen square demanding that the Chinese delegation refuse to sign the treaty; the return of Qingdao to China; the abolition of twenty-one demands and the boycott of Japanese goods.¹ Consequently the students were jailed and immediately a massive unrest of the workers and the merchants started, which forced the release of the students. The Chinese delegation at Versailles also refused to conform to Japan's demands. This particular episode was neither the beginning nor the culmination of the series of incidents which started a few years back. But it necessarily marked a definite stage of the making of the social / political and cultural revolution in China. This particular episode and the series of incidents which followed thereby can be analyzed in several different angles. Conforming to the main argument here discussion will be limited to the workers' and the peasants' struggle which followed thereby (the workers immediately, the peasantry much later) and the consequent political and intellectual developments which could be associated with the movements of these two constituencies.

This particular incident precipitated as a result of warlordism and foreign imperialism. Thereby it is important to observe how these two issues affected the constituencies mentioned above. Around 1919 China was a republic in name but the state machinery was in the hands of social classes like the rural gentry, former officials of the imperial regime, military leaders and the moderates amongst the big bourgeoisie. The Anfu faction, led by Marshall Duan Qirui had close ties with Japan. After contracting the Nishihara loans from Japan in 1918, Duan Qirui's position was firmly secure. He attempted to bring back the political ethics of submission to the established order. The rural gentry were employed by the provincial governments to fill up the posts like the district magistrates. They were generally on good terms with the warlords.²

These elements were on the main opposed by the secret societies and the radical intelligentsia. The role of the secret societies were however dubious. The radical intelligentsia debated the nature and scope of revolutionary ideas.³ The Chinese businessmen who on the one hand faced stiff and unfair competition from the foreign entrepreneurs and on the other hand were milked by the warlords also opposed the regime. They set about advancing their own projects and by 1919, they formed a number of associations for advancing industrial techniques and knowhows. However their attitude towards the West and the conservatives in power were mixed. They evinced sympathetic attitudes towards the West and wanted the restoration of the constitution of 1912.⁴

The foreign penetration of China was perceived in other political matters as well. Since the First Opium war of 1842 the foreign powers opened several treaty ports in China and consequently concessions and settlements around them. These settlements and concessions were very much in existence around 1919. The concessions and settlements were the districts in certain of the ports, where the foreign powers had their own municipal administration. There they maintained their own police force and levied taxes. The nationals of the treaty powers could escape justice from the Chinese courts. After the

fall of the Empire, the Powers introduced a system where all the revenue collected was paid to the Hong Kong and Shanghai banking corporation, the Yokohama Special Bank, the Bank of Indochina which were collectively called “custodian banks”. The revenue collected was mostly used to pay off the various Chinese loans and other financial obligations. Only the surplus that remained was put at the disposal of the Beijing government. Most of the industrial enterprises particularly the tramway companies, the cotton mills, the K.M.A mines were under foreign control.⁵ The management of these factories were characterized by harsh treatment of the workers with particular callous attitude towards their welfare. There were little or no precautions against accidents. Compensations were low. In the foreign owned enterprise the foreigners were employed in the upper and the middle managerial ranks and were often foremen and the overseers. In the Japanese owned factories, the Japanese usually staffed the managerial ranks. White Russians who fled from Siberia after the Bolshevik revolution were often employed in the minor managerial posts (in particular in the French enterprises). The foreigners who supervised the Chinese workers wielded authoritarian attitudes which were often tinged with racial hatred.⁶ In the big factories the foremen also maintained gangs of henchmen who were employed to subdue the workers, dissent. Yet in many instances the workers evinced a measure of loyalty towards the foremen. For one thing they were completely dependent on the foremen for their jobs. The ingrained discourse of the Confucian ethics of submission may also account for this sort of behavior. Monthly or annual holidays were rare in China and a weekly day of rest was unknown. These situations could only prove to be the natural cause of unrest between the Chinese workers and foreign management.

The workers’ restive response towards these conditions was perceptible. But the working-class of China at that time was too small (about 0.4% of China’s total population of about 450 million).⁷ The workers were also divided according to provincial basis. Thereby their unrest and dissent in the years prior to 1919 were waged on piecemeal basis. Around 1919 there were several organizations and political parties like the Liberal party, the Socialist Party, the labour Party where the individuals looked towards the labour movement as a fruitful field of action but in any movement waged by these parties the workers usually formed the rearguard units. With the proliferation of the Marxist ideas after the October revolution of 1918 in Russia, the interest in working-class dissent began.⁸

On May 4th 1919, after the outbreak of the students’ demonstrations, the movement spread rapidly. Soon the students, politicians, businessmen intellectuals in most of the provinces of China got involved. The Chambers of commerce, many industrial associations all reiterated the students’ demands. In Shanghai a meeting was held on May 7th by 57 associations of various kinds where a systematic boycott of Japanese goods was proposed.⁹ At this initial stage a large number of workers took part in the demonstrations and boycott. In Beijing a big meeting was held on May 11th, similar such meetings took place in Nanchang and Tsinan. In Nanchang a large number of workers came up with the idea of workers’ strike and the closure of shops. The dockers and the rickshaw men were the first to get involved. The dockers refused to handle Japanese goods, the rickshaw men in Hangzhou refused to transport the Japanese nationals. Many workers, particularly those in Changshintian and Hunan together with students and the elements of the intelligentsia and the businessmen formed an organization called the Groups of Ten for National Salvation. They asked to form a provincial federation. The Beijing government was not

intimidated. The pro-Japanese ministers were retained in the offices. The most active students along with the radical intellectuals in the universities like Chen Duxiu were arrested. All in all about four hundred students were imprisoned.¹⁰ The news soon spread to Shanghai and tens of thousands of Shanghai workers came on strike. The Chinese shops in the concession and were closed. These strikes affected the cotton mills of Yangzebu, the Jiangnan arsenal, a number of foundries and the mechanical workshops, the docks, the Shanghai — Nanjing and also the Shanghai — Hangzhou railway lines, the telegraph and the telephone companies, the foreign and the Chinese owned tramways, the waterworks, the commercial press, the British Anglo Tobacco factories, the storage depots of the Standard Oil and of the East Asia Company.¹¹ It was a big movement. Organizationally an independent working-class movement was starting to appear.

Jean Chesneaux, a French historian noted that most of these strikes were initiated by a zealous few who persuaded the rest to follow suits. Some of the craft guilds which survived also organized the workers. e. g the Metalworkers' Guild organized the strike movement in the waterworks, the railways and the Chinese tramways.¹² The labour party and many of the industrial societies which appeared then also organized the workers. Yet when these organizations were involved, the working-class waged its movement mainly in support of the interests of the other social classes e. g On June 5th the All-China industrial Federation was formed in Shanghai to protest the arrest of the students. The merchants, journalists and the students formed the command structure, the labourers were given a minor role.¹³ The labourers were designated by the term Hou Dun which meant rearguard units. This particular point was augmented by a declaration issued by the metalworkers' guild which stated "The workers form the rearguard units of the merchants and the students."¹⁴ Around June 12th, the Beijing government dismissed the three pro-Japanese ministers from office. The strike movement continued amongst the coolies and the street porters of Guangzhou. In Guangzhou several workers and merchants organizations met together to promote the "national products." The dockers of Amoy and Jiujiang, the rickshaw men of Nanjing and Tientsin refused to transport the Japanese nationals or the Japanese goods.¹⁵ On June 28th, 1919, the date for the signing of the peace treaty, the Chinese students, workers, and the overseas Chinese surrounded the headquarters of the Chinese delegation and the residence of Lu Chengsiang, the chief delegate. The Chinese delegate refused to sign the Peace Treaty of Versailles.¹⁶

In this particular episode the political and the patriotic sentiments of the workers is apparent. The workers made no demands for higher wages but demonstrated against the injustices which was being done to their country. A Chinese writer, one Han Suyin noted that even peasants in far off Szechuan, who knew nothing about the First World War were indignant at the wrong being done to their country.¹⁷ Since this episode the workers started making increasing and effective uses of strike actions. This particular episode was neither the beginning nor the end of the series of the workers' struggle but it was greatly significant. After this episode a bond was forged between the radical intellectuals and the dissenting workers. The radical intellectuals in the universities whose commitment towards China's salvation made them search for a constituency where their comrades could be sought out found one, whose solidarity could be relied upon. After the 4th May incident of 1919, an important event in China's revolutionary history, particularly in the

context of the workers' and the peasants' movement is the formation of the Communist Party of China.

The Birth of The Communist Party of China

The Chinese intellectuals' interest in Marxism grew after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Previously sections of The Communist Manifesto were translated into Chinese. However it was only after the history of the Bolshevik revolution became known in China that the interest in Marxism grew.¹⁸ Li Dazhao, the then head librarian of the Beijing University, became one of the pioneer proponents of Marxism in China. In June 1918, Li Dazhao saluted the Bolshevik revolution. He reportedly stated that in the Soviet Union, a third civilization was rising to mediate between the East and the West.¹⁹

The same year, he established an informal study group composed of students and the faculty members to discuss political developments. By the end of that year, this group called itself the "Marxist Research Society". Li Dazhao made analytical discussions of Karl Marx's Das Capital. Soon Chen Duxiu, the then Dean of the Beijing University and simultaneously the editor of the journal New Youth decided to run a special issue on Marxism. In 1919, Li Dazhao in his essay "My Marxist Views" made a careful analysis of the concept of class struggle and also the problem of capitalist exploitation.²⁰ As such it is apparent that some of the dissenting intellectuals' views were steering towards the workers' struggle. But this study circle was still composed mostly by the members of the urban intelligentsia.²¹ Soon the issue came to the fore that whether the Marxist theoretical ideas had any relevance towards the social situation in China.

Soon Li Dazhao urged his students to go out to the countryside and investigate the conditions of the peasantry. He reportedly stated that as the majority of China's population lived in the countryside, most of her labouring class was composed by the peasantry. To liberate the nation, it was therefore necessary to liberate the peasantry. The fate of the nation was dependant on the fate of the peasantry. He called the students to go to the countryside, enlighten the peasantry and help liberate them.²² Even at this early stage of the party's inception Li Dazhao gave great emphasis on the peasantry .

By 1920, the students of the Beijing University established the "Mass Education Speech Corps". The members of this organization traveled to the villages and tried to put these ideas into practice. This trend continued for a long time. The students traveled to the provinces of Hebei, Shandong, Henan, Shanxi and Shaanxi. all of these provinces were then riddled with famine.²³ The students learned about the desperation and poverty which was endemic in the Chinese society. As such, these students, most of whom were bearers of the ideological tenets of the May Fourth movement gradually began to shift their orientation from a cultural – intellectualistic approach towards the ground reality of the Chinese society. Around that time Vladimir Illich Lenin established the Third International of the Communist Party. Its main emphasis was to encourage socialist revolutions in other countries. A manifesto addressed to the "proletarians of the whole world" was issued. The Communists around the world were urged to fight the non-communist labour movements; all the colonial people who were fighting the imperialist regimes were praised; the issue of the Chinese resisting the Japanese encroachments was mentioned.²⁴

The Fourth May Incident

The Chinese Communist Party was founded in July, 1921 in a Chinese school in the French Concession in Shanghai. The delegates who represented the 57 members, who then constituted the total strength of the party were all intellectuals.²⁵ According to the French historian Jean Chesneaux, the choice of Shanghai was significant, for it was the then major industrial centre of China.²⁶ Also the twelve or thirteen intellectuals who founded the Communist party all had real experience in the labour movements.

At a conference which followed immediately the party guidelines were first discussed, then came the issue of the Chinese labour movement.²⁷ It was decided that the main operations of the party would be conducted secretly, but to keep up the labour unrest and form the trade unions an open organization called the Chinese labour Organizations Secretariat abbreviated as the labour Secretariat was created.²⁸ There fore the labour movement was the key issue in the early communist schemes. From 1921 onwards, the Labour secretariate encouraged strike action and union organizations. As far as the organizational aspects were concerned, the secretariate helped to form the workers' clubs e.g. in the Qing-Han railway line the railwaymen's clubs were formed. In Hunan, evening classes and extramural schoolsb were organized for the railwaymen and thw miners. Activists like Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Li Lisan and Guo Liang undertook these activities. Similar such schools were organized for the Pingsiang and the Anyuan miners in 1922.²⁹ Around the end of 1921, the Labour secretariate started publishing a journal called the Laogong Zhoukan The Workingmen's Weekly.³⁰ Strike actions were organized amongst the railwaymen working in the Yue-Han railway line in October, 1921 and the Changsha rickshawmen at about the same time. In 1922 similar such strike actions were organized amongst the Changsha printers.³¹ It is apparent therefore that at its inceptio, the activities of the Chinese communists were mostly geared towards the workers' struggle. The workers' movement continued to be undertaken in the form of strikes. Various such strike actions took place. The demands were mostly economic in nature. One of the biggest and most important of these strikes is the Hong-Kong seamens' strike of 1922. At the end of the First World War, the disparity between the wages and the price of the goods were becoming increasingly acute e.g in South China, the price of rice soared from 5.60 yuan per picul in July, 1918 to 10.50 yuan in April, 1919.³²

The copper currency also depreciated e. g in 1913, the silver yuan was equivalent to 130 copper cash in 1913 which became 136 in 1919.³³ These incidents could only increase the hardships of the workers. The Chinese seamen faced difficulties in the matters of recruitment and working conditions. Meanwhile the seamen had a proper trade union, the General Industrial Federation of Chinese Seamen.³⁴ The seamen were also encouraged by the fact that in December, 1920, the printing workers in Canton could effected a 40% hike in wages as a result of strike action.³⁵ In the summer of 1921 preparations for the strike action were undertaken. A "committee for the wage readjustments" was formed and departments to launch propaganda campaigns were set up. A list of demands were drawn up which included issues like 10 to 50% increase of wages; the right of the union to deal directly in recruiting the seamen; the presence of the delegates when contracts of employment were signed.³⁶ It is apparent that the labour movement was broadening its scope, for apart from the demands to raise the wages, the rights of the workers were also brought to the fore. These demands were placed in September and November of 1921. The demands were ignored. On January 12th, 1922,

the seamen placed their ultimatum. The following day the seamen went on strike.³⁷ At first about two thousand striking seamen left for Canton and established their headquarters there. They were soon joined by the other seamen. Within a fortnight about 6500 seamen went on strike.³⁸ By the end of January about 151 ships were affected. The big shipping companies and the economic life of the island were affected. Soon the coolies in Canton refused to load those ships which were sent to obtain supplies for Hong Kong.³⁹ As a result there was shortage of foods and raw materials. The Hong Kong government made enormous efforts for a settlement. From January 17 to January 28th, a series of negotiations were worked out. At first, the shipping companies insisted that they could not increase the wages beyond 17.5 to 25%. The seamen remained adamant in their demands that the wages should be increased by 20 to 40%. they further proposed that the representatives of the Canton government, the British consulate in Canton, the Western shipping companies and the union of the striking workers should meet in Canton and discuss the issues of raising the wages; reinstating the striking workers without penalties and regularize the matters of recruitment.⁴⁰ On January 29th, the coolies and the dockhands of Hong Kong declared a sympathy strike. Meanwhile on January 16th, the Hong Kong government had declared martial law. The Seamen's Union was declared illegal, its offices were closed, its leaders were arrested. On February 8th, the dockhand Guilds were dissolved, the most active members of the Seamen's union were placed under police surveillance. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce and various other Chinese bourgeoisie groups also started to pressurize the striking workers.⁴¹ This feature is important, The workers' movement was gradually acquiring the nature of class struggle. The seamen stuck to their demands and continued the strike action. By the beginning of February there were an estimated forty thousand strikers, and some 2,80,000 tons of shipping were immobilized. The command structure of the strikers went underground. Branch offices of the strikers were established in Swatow, Wuzhou and Guangdong. The seamen in Wuzhou and Swatow also went on strike to maintain solidarity with the Hong Kong seamen. In Shanghai the labour Secretariat formed a committee to support the strikers. The Canton mechanics, railwaymen and the craftsmen greeted those strikers who arrived in Canton and lodged them. The Constitutionalist government in Canton provided loans and monetary aids to the strikers.⁴² The progressive elements of the Guomindang favoured providing substantial aids to the strikers. However the moderates amongst the Cantonese gentry were more hesitant in this matter. In this milieu the Cantonese government maintained a benevolent attitude towards the strikers. But it declined to take any direct action on the behalf of the strikers.⁴³ Soon on February 26th all the workers in Hong Kong went on strike. Soon elements like vegetable sellers, basketmakers, electricians, domestic servants joined the strikers. Finally on March 3rd an agreement was reached between the delegates of the strikers and the Hong Kong government. It was decided to raise the workers' wages by 15% to 30%. Two days later the order to dissolve the Seamen's union was annulled and the following day the arrested workers were released. The strike ended.⁴⁴

This strike movement was important in several respects. For one thing that apart from demanding the raising of wages, the workers brought to the fore the issue of the abuse of their rights. This was the first time that the workers from different provinces and localities buried their interregional rivalries, forged a great solidarity to wage a "working – class movement". Also the cleavages between the bourgeoisie and the workers started

to become increasingly acute. The tenacity with which the workers waged their movement and the unease which they caused to the foreign imperialist powers highlighted them to Sun Yatsen and the Guomindang. It was also the first time that China's working-class made a direct attack on its own to the economic interests of the foreign powers.

Soon the labour Secretariat decided to convene the all China labour Congress. The Congress opened on May 1st⁴⁵ It was attended by about 160 delegates representing a hundred trade associations in twelve cities. During the four days of meeting, the Communists, the anarchists and some of the delegates who were sympathetic to the Guomindang debated on various ideas. No unanimous solution was obtained.⁴⁶ However it was the first time that the labour organizations from all over China met each other.⁴⁷ Ultimately consensus was attained in the matters like the formation of industrial unions, class solidarity, and eight – hour's working day etc. The labour Secretariat failed to organize the whole labour movement of China according to the theories of class-struggle, but it was gaining experience about how to move along that line.

In June 1922, the labour secretariat moved its offices to Beijing from Shanghai . The Secretariat continued its activities of organizing strikes; in addition publications were started to make the people of China aware of the workers' struggle.⁴⁸ Workers' clubs were started in places like the Anyuan collieries, the Yue Han line, the Daye foundaries, the Changjiang engineering works. Through these clubs a mutual benefit system, a consumers' co-operative, educational and recreational facilities and libraries were started.⁴⁹ Around September these clubs were amalgamated into one general club and in November this institution became a full fledged union. Soon manifestos were issued which called for the strengthening the workers' solidarity and overthrowing the oppressive forces of the society. From these observations it is clear that the labour Secretariat was organizing the workers along class lines. Soon the 'workers' clubs "became a cover to organize the workers. Printing workers, rickshaw men, the employees, the employees in the powdered egg factories, the workers in the cotton boiling and the tobacco factories soon joined these clubs.⁵⁰ In Hunan, Hubei and Anyuan the foremen, the labour contractor and other personnels of the management tried to counter these measures by trying to form their own clubs. They were not much successful. But these incidents clearly reveal that contradictions along the class lines were starting to take shape. The aims of these workers' clubs were to give a strong foundation to the dissident workers. In July, the workers in Hanyang Steel works and the Wuchang Steel factories went on strike. Soon the workers in the Anyuan Collieries, the Changjiang Engineering works followed suit. The workers' club went into action. The striking workers put forward the the demands of the payment of higher wages; compensation for accidents, injury and death; medical fee for sickness; a workers' share in the profits and the abolition of private labour done for the overseers and the foremen.⁵¹ The natures of these demands clearly reveal that the labour movement was widening its range of issues.

Those workers who went on strike met a variety of responses. The striking workers also tried to force the government authorities. Those workers who went on strike also tried to force the government to grant official recognition to the workers' clubs. This feature also highlights the fact that the dissenting workers and the Communist organizers were still fighting or rather trying to make some adjustments within the existing political

system. The workers' movement was not yet militant enough to attempt a radical replacement of the existing system. In places like the Yue Hun railway and the Hanyang arsenal, the authorities forcibly subdued the workers. But in places like Anyuan, the workers' demands were met with.

In the spring of 1922, Wu Beifu, a northern warlord and his Chili faction emerged victorious over their Fengtian rivals. Initially Wu Beifu pretended that he was a militarist who wanted social and political progress along with China's territorial integrity. In order to weaken his rival factions like the Communications Clique and the Fengtian faction he forged an alliance with the Communists and the dissident workers.⁵² The Labour Secretariat also utilized this opportunity to establish its control over the whole of the Cheng – Tai railway line and the whole of the Ching-Feng line. The workers' clubs were established in 16 stations along these railway lines. Apart from raising the questions of wages, the workers also demanded control over the recruitment system and the provision of recreational facilities and restrooms. The workers formed pickets to maintain discipline. Most of these demands of these workers were met with.

From late 1922 to 1923 the working – class unrest was perceived amongst the K.M.A miners, the women workers of the silk-reeling factories in Hangzhou and Chabei, the workers of the Shanghai textile industry. In the last instance incidents of Luddhism occurred. Amongst these incidents, the one that bore particular impact was the Qing – Han incident of 1923. Before going to that issue a brief glance at the political developments of China at that time is essential. In 1923, the warlord government in Central China grew wary of the labour movement. The growing influence of the Communists among the Qing-Han railwaymen particularly worried them. As has been mentioned before, the Comintern agent Maring visited Sun Yatsen in 1921. At that time Sun Yatsen was trying to co-ordinate his national reunification drive in Southern China. Sun Yatsen reportedly found the new economic policies launched by V.I. Lenin to be promising.⁵³ Around the end of 1922, the Comintern dispatched more agents to China. Sun Yatsen also decided to allow more Communist members into his party, the Guomindang. In January, 1923, Sun Yatsen held meetings with the Soviet diplomat Adolf Joffe. In a joint statement which issued therefrom, Sun Yatsen reportedly stated that the situation in China was not yet favourable for the introduction of Communism. The issues of national unification and national independence were of paramount importance in China. In addition Adolf Joffe reiterated the Russian people's support for the Chinese. Around that time, the British mines in Honan, the military camps in Baoting and Loyang and Wuhan were the most important political and economic centres in Central China and also in the lower Changjiang region. Incidentally the Qing-Han railway line was also the main communications line between Beijing and the above mentioned places. Wu Beifu and his Chili faction had close ties with the British firms. They were annoyed by the political unrest among the railway men. According to Jean Chesneaux, Wu Beifu initially supported the Communists in order to get their help in subduing his opponents like the Communications Clique. The dissenting workers in Central China came into conflict with the Western firms (the British firms in particular) around 1923.⁵⁴ In Hangzhou strikes were held at the British Cigarette Company and the British Cotton mills. In January, at the cotton baling factory, violent clashes between the striking workers and the British police took place. On several occasions like these the police stations were besieged and at least on one occasion, the Superintendent of police was beaten up.⁵⁵ Soon the British created an armed volunteer force of foreign residents called the "special constabulary" to resist the strikers.⁵⁶ The local workers' unions and the Hubei provincial federation supported the

strikers. During the strikes at Hangzhou, the striking workers distributed leaflets and the provincial federation also issued statements suggesting that the commercial relations between China and Great Britain be broken off; the British police at Hangzhou were criticized; the “foreign capitalists” and their compradors were denounced. These activities were unexpected for the British and they compromised temporarily. The arrested workers were released; Mackenzie and Company and the British Cigarette Company officially recognized the unions in their companies. The management decided to negotiate the workers’ issues with these unions.⁵⁷

The dissent of China’s working – class was acquiring both nationalistic and Communist overtones. At a time when the leaders and the militarists of China somehow or other compromised with the foreign powers, in addition exploited regional and factional differences, these sections of the common people were emerging bold enough to risk the wrath of the militarists and the foreign capitalists alike in order to shape their and their country’s destiny. In February, 1923, Qing-Han railway men’s clubs merged together to form the Qing-Han General Union.⁵⁸ On February 2nd, a conference of the union was planned to be held at Chengzhou. There the delegates of other railway men’s unions and the other labour organizations were invited. At that point Wu Beifu decided to ban the conference on the pretext of military reasons. The wouldbe members of the union still held the conference at the appointed place and time. They issued the declaration of the founding of the union and dispersed immediately. Several members of the workers’ delegates were arrested and numerous others were harassed.⁵⁹

To protest this particular incident, the members of the nascent union went on strike. They presented the demands like:

- i) Removing the managing director of the railway network.
- ii) The reimbursement of the expenses incurred by the union to prepare the conference.
- iii) The removal of police from the premises of the union offices.
- iv) Granting of a weekly day of rest along with payment.
- v) payment of a week’s salary at the Lunar New Year.⁶⁰

Given the nascent stage of its formation, these demands were very bold ones. But the nature of the demands also reveals that the workers’ dissent had not yet become radical. These workers attempted to bring about a decent and honourable position for themselves within the existing system.

A large-scale strike affecting the entire Qing-Han railway line broke out on February 4th, 1923. This time the authorities’ attitudes were hard from the very beginning. The leaders of the striking workers were arrested. The strikebreakers called Xin Gang were employed; engineers were requisitioned for military services. The strikers refused to budge. After three days, the Chili faction brought about military intervention whereby the troops of Cao Kun at Changshintian, those of Wu Beifu at Chengzhou, those of the Governor Xiao Yaonan at Jiangnan attacked the strikers. An estimated 35 workers died and scores of others were injured.⁶¹ Soon the Western nations aided these militarists. On February 8th, the Hubei Provincial Federation declared a strike to protest the massacre. It was suppressed brutally by the British marines. The militarists also consulted the representatives of the Western powers on the sly before making the military intervention.⁶²

From this episode, an immediate observation comes to the fore. The “class war” was taking a very prominent shape in the history of China’s political turmoil. The militarists and the foreign powers were emerging as allies with the common people as their opponents.

Soon after these episodes public feelings and sentiments ran high in many of the labour organizations throughout China. All the Wuhan Labour organizations launched sympathy strikes. The railwaymen on the Cheng Tai, Jin Bu and the Qing-Feng lines went on strike. In Shanghai, the dissenting workers were prevented from going on strike by General He Fenglin who declared martial law and the police of the International Settlement who searched the Workers’ Union Office’s premises (once again a grim testimony to the fact of the solidarity between the militarists and the foreign powers against common people).⁶³ After this setback, the leaders of the Labour unions critically analyzed the methods of the Labour movements. The previous illusions of alliance with the Chili faction were lost. For the next one year the labour movement abated a bit. The Labour organizations experienced the repressive measures which were undertaken by the warlords.⁶⁴ The labour organizers still tried to maintain the unions secretly.⁶⁵ The repressive measures increased and became more harsh.⁶⁶ In January, 1924, at the Guomindang congress, co-operation with the Communists was sought out. Around that time, the labour organizers had a strategy and the movement revived again. Consequently in the mid-1920s the labour movement created a significant political episode.

References:

1. Jean Chesneaux, *The Chinese Labor Movement, 1919-1927*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1968, p. 152
2. Ibid, pp 15-17
3. Jonathan. D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, W.W.NORTONS Company, New York, London, 1999, pp. 300-305
4. Op. Cit, p. 19
5. Ibid, pp. 6-7
6. Ibid, pp. 79-81
7. Ibid, p. 47
8. Ibid, pp. 135-137
9. Ibid, p. 151
10. Ibid, p. 152
11. Ibid, pp. 152-153
12. Ibid, p. 153
13. Ibid, p. 153
14. Ibid, p. 154
15. Ibid, pp. 154-155
16. Han Suyin, *The Mortal Flower*, Panther Books LTD, Frogmore, St Albans, Herts AL22NF, p. 45
17. Ibid, p. 46
18. Jonathan. D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, W.W.NORTON & COMPANY, New York, London, 1999, p. 295
19. Ibid, p. 296
20. Ibid, p. 296
21. Ibid, p. 297
22. Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-Chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1967, pp. 80-81

23. Op. Cit, pp. 298-299
24. Ibid, p. 308
25. Jean Chesneaux, The Chinese Labor Movement, 1919-1927, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1968, p. 177
26. Ibid, p. 177
27. Ibid, p. 178
28. Ibid, p. 178
29. Ibid, p. 179
30. Ibid, p. 180
31. Ibid, p. 179
32. Ibid, p. 131
33. Ibid, p. 131
34. Ibid, p. 181
35. Ibid, p. 181
36. Ibid, p. 181
37. Ibid, p. 181
38. Ibid, p. 181
39. Ibid, p. 181
40. Ibid, p. 182
41. Ibid, p. 182
42. Ibid, p. 183
43. Ibid, pp. 183-184
44. Ibid, p. 184
45. Ibid, p. 185
46. Ibid, pp. 185-186
47. Ibid, p. 187
48. Ibid, p. 187
49. Ibid, p. 187
50. Ibid, p. 187
51. Ibid, p. 190
52. Ibid, pp. 191-192
53. OP.,cit, pp. 314-315
54. Op.,Cit, p. 207
55. Ibid, p. 207
56. Ibid, p. 207
57. Ibid, p. 207
58. Ibid, p. 208
59. Ibid, p. 208
60. Ibid, pp. 208-209
61. Ibid, p. 209
62. Ibid, p. 209
63. Ibid, p. 213
64. Ibid, p. 213
65. Ibid, pp. 220-221

About the Author: Atreya Bhatta, Assistant Professor, Department of Chinese Language & Culture, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.