



100 years of the Chinese revolution

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On 4 May, 1919, in Beijing, some 3,000 students demonstrated outside the home of the Minister of Communications, a notoriously pro-Japanese figure. After pelting its residents with eggs, they broke in, trashed the building and then torched it. This violent, but rather small scale, incident turned out to be one of the key turning points in 20th Century history, in many ways the real beginning of the Chinese Revolution.

Some days before, news had reached China that the Peace Conference in Paris had agreed to cede Germany's "sphere of influence" in the province of Shandong, including control of its railways and mines, to Japan, rather than return them to Chinese control. This was despite China having entered the First World War on the Allies' side and sending some 100,000 labourers, "coolies" as the British called them, to work on the Western Front in return for promises that Shandong would be returned.

The Beijing police quickly dispersed the demo but the next day, encouraged by the favourable response from many newspapers as well as Cai Yuan-pei, the university's Chancellor, the students founded the Beijing Students' Union with the express aim of spreading their protests nationwide.

Within days, student unions had been formed in most of the major cities and support came not only from leading intellectuals and the more liberal media but also from Chambers of Commerce and business associations. Police repression was stepped up in Beijing with hundreds of arrests but this did not have the intended effect; on 19 May, the Students' Union called a national strike ? and the call was heeded.

Martial law was declared in Beijing and the Japanese Navy sent marines into coastal cities, but the students' strike spread. For the first time, urban workers took political strike action: 60,000 in Shanghai, already the main commercial centre of the country. On 12 June, the government freed all those imprisoned, sacked three pro-Japanese ministers and declared that it would not ratify the Versailles Treaty.

It was the response to this climbdown that showed that something fundamental had changed in China, a country famed for its culture of obedience and filial piety. The students announced that, while the demonstrations and strikes would stop, there would now be a national boycott of all Japanese goods and firms, to be enforced by "Groups of Ten" organised locally throughout the country. While no boycott is ever 100 per cent, the impact on Japanese businesses was very real; one US correspondent reckoned it could cost Japanese firms \$400 million.

Perhaps even more importantly, the boycott, which also spread to the many Chinese communities overseas, required organisation. The Groups of Ten called public meetings, issued leaflets and newspaper articles detailing the ways in which foreign powers not only humiliated China but blocked the growth of domestic industry. Not surprisingly, Chinese employers enthusiastically supported this, organising public subscription campaigns to fund patriotic investments.

The speed with which this youth-led movement spread was completely unprecedented but it pointed to a general mood of discontent in the country. Foreign powers had taken control of much of China's administration, as well as huge swathes of territory. The British and French, for example, controlled taxation, forwarding revenue to the government only after they had deducted reparations and interest charges they had imposed after the Opium Wars and the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in 1901.

Students in particular were also acutely aware of how backward China was, how ineffectual its government was. For many, reverence for the past was the key obstacle to modernisation. While resenting foreign power, they admired both Science and Democracy and debated strategies for change in locally produced magazines.

May Fourth pulled together all of the different strands of discontent and, in so doing, gave them coherence and focus, combining the struggle against foreign domination with that against the government and for modernisation. The international context also resolved the potentially contradictory admiration for foreign ideas and politics. While the victorious Allies denied China its rights, in Moscow, the Soviet government not only denounced the Versailles Treaty but unilaterally renounced all of Tsarist Russia's impositions on China.

In July, the first communist discussion groups were formed, the following year contact was established with Moscow and within two years the Chinese Communist Party was founded. Although it is thought only to have had 57 members at the time, its supporters were already publishing a newspaper, Labour World, aimed at the urban working class and were active in the emerging trade union movement.

A century later, there are still lessons to be learnt from the May Fourth Movement. Above all, the recognition that revolutionaries have to take their politics into the day-to-day struggles of the great mass of workers is as true now as it was then. That this is not just an empty truism but a practical task, is shown by the actions of Marxist students, many of them from Beijing University, who joined the picket lines of workers at the Jasic plant in Shenzhen, who took strike action in their struggle to establish their own trade union last summer.

As in 1919, the principal task of Marxists in China today is to organise themselves into a party that can root itself in the working class, recognising that it is the only social force that can not only overthrow the existing party dictatorship but go on to overthrow the capitalist system that party has restored.

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