

## THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE BEIJING WORKERS' AUTONOMOUS FEDERATION

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The Workers' Autonomous Federation emerged in May 1989 as a prototype for a future independent trade union movement in China. It arose alongside the student demonstrations which began in April 1989 calling for greater democracy, an end to corruption, a more open and accountable government and autonomous student unions.

Under the red banner of the Workers' Autonomous Federation and fluttering slogans calling for democracy and freedom of association, between fifty and one hundred workers erected a tented headquarters on the outskirts of the students' tents at the Tiananmen Square in Beijing in mid-May.

Members of the union were mostly production workers, service sector workers and worker intellectuals. Among the core members, there were steelworkers, railway workers, aviation workers, restaurant cooks, students and lawyers.

Apart from Beijing, workers at the camp also came from other areas such as Tianjin, Shanxi, the northern cities, Jiangsu, and they ranged in age from early 20's to late 40's. Their action was the first open attempt by workers to set up an autonomous organization outside the official-run All-China Federation of Trade-Unions (ACFTU).

The organizers launched their action by issuing pamphlets and leaflets to publicize criticisms of the present labour policies, union structure and to spread their call for a genuine and democratic workers' movement. They also set up a public address system in Tiananmen Square to explain their demands.

The organizers worked in harsh conditions, staging round-the-clock pickets in the Square under flimsy tent roofs, in the blazing heat, rain and cold with a lack of food and sleep. They were bombarded from two sides by the competing loudspeakers. On the one side, their own broadcasts continued to repeat their calls, punctuated by the Internationale and other songs. On the other side, the Central government public address system blared official propaganda, repeating Martial law regulations and issuing warnings to the demonstrators.

At any time during the day, hundreds and sometimes thousands of workers and residents crowded around the Federation loudspeakers, listening to the speeches. Whenever the union managed to print some handouts (which was sporadic due to the lack of printing facilities), the crowd rushed up to grab a copy. The demand always outstripped the supply many-fold.

### **The Struggle for Democracy is Linked to that of Satisfying Demands**

Amidst the students' campaign for democracy and liberty, workers set up the union in mid-May. The founders reckoned that the fight for democracy and liberty bore relevance to their immediate interests, allowing the workers to have independent and genuine representation in policy making as well as improving their own economic position.

Members and correspondents were recruited at the camp site, and several hundred workers had already signed up and received membership cards.

The Hongkong Trade Union Education Centre (TUEC) paid daily visits to the Federation's tented headquarters in Tiananmen Square between June 1st and 3rd before the massacre. The situation was already growing tense by this time. Three of the Federation's leaders had been detained by the Public Security Bureau earlier in the week. Although they were later released, they were under close surveillance, and so remained in hiding. The other leaders were also pursued by the public Security agents and therefore could only appear at odd times.

During our meetings we discussed the issues and problems the union leaders were addressing, their needs and their future plans. The unionists said they felt the priorities were to build up their network among the grassroot workers, to consolidate the organization internally, to propagate their ideas further, to develop membership and to develop the resources, leadership, skills and infrastructure needed for the new federation.

They saw their main obstacle as the clearly expressed antagonism coming from the government and the government-run union movement, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). The authorities were labelling them an unlawful body comprised of unruly elements. They were also concerned that there was some resistance from some demonstrating students towards workers' involvement in the democracy campaign. Some students apparently felt the need to restrict their campaign purely to students and intellectuals.

The problem which the Federation was addressing focused on the corrupt bureaucracy and the existence of a privileged elite in China. The wide wage discrepancy between the workers and plant managers, the lack of workplace democracy, the lack of genuine workers' representation in the policy-making process, poor labour protection and working conditions, and the deterioration of workers' living standards in recent years were among their main grievances.

On June 3rd, the federation's leaders were still talking of ways to legalize their organization, by liaising with the some relatively sympathetic sections within the ACFTU, and by gathering support from the democratic political parties. They were insistent that they wanted to organize their Autonomous Federation through constitutional and legal means and stated that they did not oppose the rule of the Chinese Communist Party.

The Autonomous Federation Camp was sited towards the northeast of the square. On the evening before the massacre, troops were massing at that end of the square, and it was clear that a confrontation of some sort was about to occur. The members of the union were among the most courageous of the demonstrators, and holding their union banner high, they marched to the front of the crowds facing the waiting troops. It was from this corner of Tiananmen Square that the massacre began.

Students who survived the massacre told us in the following hours that most of the representatives of the Autonomous Workers' Federation were killed as the troops attacked.

On the eighth of June, three days after the massacre, the regime announced that the Workers' Autonomous Federation alongside the student Autonomous Federation were counter-revolutionary organizations, and they would specifically round up and arrest the organizers and activists in these groups. The government set up a special telephone hotline for informers to assist with the process of hunting the members of these groups.

On Friday 9th June, demonstrators numbering more than one hundred thousand rallied in Shanghai. Among the protesters' banners were those from the Shanghai Workers Autonomous Federation. It was reported that there were at least one thousand workers rallying behind this particular banner.

There were also reports that similar independent trade union banners were raised in Guangzhou following the Beijing massacre. Demonstrators continue in most cities of China as the truth about events in Beijing spreads through the nation.

After the massacre by tanks and machine guns of the peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations held by students and workers in Beijing on the morning of June 4th, the next ten days saw a reign of terror in the Chinese capital as well as in many other Chinese cities. The government had asked people to use its special hotline to report any leader of activists who were known to have been involved with the autonomous students' or workers' federations.

On 12th June, the Chinese Central Television (CCTV) showed a badly beaten leader of the Shanghai Autonomous Workers' Federation who was detained by the Public Security Bureau. On the same day, through the official media, the Chinese government called on official unions to mobilize workers to demolish independent workers' federations all over the country. It was reported that eighty people had already been rounded up in Beijing over the previous few days for involvement in the independent students' and workers' federations. The military and police forces were also given orders to shoot and kill in their arrests of the so-called 'counter-revolutionary activists'.

Initially, the ACFTU showed support for the students' pro-democracy movement in the capital city but, shortly before the violent crack-down, they back-tracked on their position. On 2 June, the ACFTU issued a statement in the *Beijing Daily*, denouncing the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation as unlawful, and called on the government to crush the pickets and other

activities organized by the federation. In the statement, the ACFTU also called on workers to rally behind the efforts to attack and eliminate the autonomous federation.

### **A Heroic and Historical Movement**

At this moment, the Chinese authorities are waging a massive and brutal witch-hunt of the pro-democracy student and labour leaders. From our discussions with the organizers and workers, it is clear that they were simply organizing for a democratic and autonomous workers' body.

Before the massacre, one of their main objectives was to seek ways to legalize their organization through peaceful means. They were also planning for grassroots mobilizing throughout the country. When asked if they wanted to push for the right to strike (which was taken away from the Chinese people in the constitutional amendments in 1982), their reply was no, for the reason that they really just wanted to organize within the laws and constitution of China.

These workers made a historic and heroic move by raising the banner of the autonomous workers' federations in Beijing, Shanghai, Xian, Hangzhou, Guangzhou and other cities of China. Their action marked the first open attempt by Chinese workers to fight for their right to organize independently since 1949. Their goals were radical, their will was genuine, their act courageous, and their means peaceful. They certainly did not deserve to be brutally murdered, beaten and detained by the Chinese authorities.

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