

The Capitalist Ground Shaken by the Earthquake in China

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A huge earthquake, registering 8.0 on the Richter scale, struck Sichuan Province in southwest China. The violent shaking lasted more than a minute, leaving towns and small cities flattened. On Sunday, May 25, a powerful aftershock struck, causing thousands more buildings to collapse.

The death toll now stands at over 62,000 people. 160,000 have been injured. Five million left homeless. More than 200,000 homes completely collapsed and four million were damaged.

The quake hit in the middle of the day when schools were in session—children were napping, sitting at their desks, and playing in schoolyards. Some reports say 30-40 percent of the dead were schoolchildren. In the town of Mianzhu alone, seven schools, including two nursery schools, collapsed—burying more than 1,700 students.

What happens when such a natural disaster occurs is profoundly affected by how a society is organized. And many things about the nature of China have been revealed by this catastrophe. Most people around the world watching this heartbreaking tragedy think China is a socialist country, run by a communist government. But in fact, since the reactionary coup led by Deng Xiaoping after Mao Tsetung's death in 1976, China has been a *capitalist* country, dependent on and subordinate to global imperialism. And some stark things about the exploitative and oppressive nature of capitalist China have been revealed in the aftermath of this devastating earthquake.

“Tofu” Schools Became Death Traps

Close to 7,000 schools, a disproportionately high number of buildings, were destroyed. In some towns, an entire generation has virtually been wiped out.

Town after town, grief has turned to anger as parents accuse the government of shoddy construction to save money. Pu Changxue, whose son died, crushed in a classroom, said: “This was a tofu dregs project and the government should assume responsibility. We all know that earthquakes are natural disasters. But what happened to our children also has human causes, and they're even more frightening.”

In Juyuan, a middle school collapsed. As many as 900 children were buried in the rubble, while nearby buildings remained standing. One resident said: “Look at the building materials they used. The cement wasn't mixed with water in the right proportion. There are not

enough steel beams. The sand isn't clean."

There are supposed to be seismic regulations and requirements for different types of buildings. But lack of money for education has meant old buildings have not been replaced. And many times, even when new schools are built, shoddy material is used and building codes are ignored in order to save money.

The bodies of kids pulled from the rubble have revealed an ugly truth about class society in China: That schools for kids from the bottom layers of society are very different than schools for students from well-off families. Children from the upper strata get a better education. They also get safer schools. And when the earthquake hit, this became a question of life or death.

According to a *New York Times* article, in Dujiangyan, the Xinjian Primary School had been poorly built and "never got its share of government funds for reconstruction because of its low ranking in the local education bureaucracy and the low social status of its students." The parents who sent their children to Xinjian are poor. Many had lost their jobs when a local cement plant shut down—some collect small welfare payments and hold down odd jobs to support their families, others had left their children behind to look for work somewhere else. Hundreds of children died at Xinjian when the earthquake hit. Meanwhile, another local primary school, Beijie, suffered hardly any damage and students survived. Beijie was set up for the elite with the best facilities and finest teachers. (*NY Times*, "Chinese Are Left to Ask Why Schools Crumbled," May 25, 2008)

Western media, as well as news reports in China, have suggested that developers tried to maximize profits by using inferior materials, cutting back on necessary work and paying off corrupt officials. The Chinese government has announced there will be investigations into whether sloppy work linked to corruption is to blame. And there will, no doubt, now be official accusations of bribery, scapegoats, and a campaign to "clean up corruption."

But the fundamental problem here is NOT corruption, inept administrators, or bribery in the building of schools. Yes, that is truly horrible and resulted in the deaths of thousands of children. But targeting this doesn't get to the *root* of the problem. The real problem here is the dynamics of capitalism—how the drive for profit trumps *everything* else, how economic growth is driven by intensifying exploitation, short-term gain, and cost minimization. And how these capitalist economic relations get reflected in and played out in the social and political relations in society and the thinking of people. Corruption is very real, but it is an outgrowth of capitalist development.

Some people say the problem is that there is not enough transparency in China. They pose the problem as: China being open or shut; listening or not; censoring the Internet or leaving it alone, etc., etc. But all this begs the fundamental question: What kind of society is China? What is its relationship to global capitalism? What does it mean that China has become a vast sweatshop for the world; that the gap between rich and poor in China is growing; that peasants in the countryside are desperate and impoverished—and that the lives of millions who were already desperately poor *because China is subordinate to imperialism* have been suddenly thrown into an even greater hell by this earthquake?

Widening Inequality Gap

Sichuan is one of China's poorest areas and does not have a lot of manufacturing. But this province is an important grain and pork producer and has China's largest reserves of natural gas.

Over the last decade there has been a burst of construction in rural, inland areas like Sichuan. But the huge inequality gap between urban and rural areas remains. And this gap has been further imprinted in the whole way that these smaller towns and cities are being developed.

Many in the areas most affected by the earthquake are poor peasants. In Wenchuan, at the epicenter of the quake, the average annual income was around 1,600 yuan in 2002 (latest available statistics), which is less than *a fifth* of the average income in the province's capital city of Chengdu. The death, damage and suffering from the earthquake reflect this income gap. Living in more impoverished conditions to begin with resulted in greater devastation and now more ongoing hardship. And inequality between the city and countryside also impacts things. For example, people in rural areas have access to much less health care than those who live in the cities. This means they are less healthy to begin with and now have less access to desperately needed medical attention.

When China was truly a socialist country, a conscious goal of the government and society was to continually *narrow* (and eventually get rid of) inequalities in society—between different classes, between men and women, between different nationalities, and between the cities and countryside. But now, through the workings of capitalism, such differences are being widened.

Time magazine has written about how “economic reforms” have chipped away at the medical treatment available when China was socialist—health care that was often rudimentary but widely available to all citizens: “China's famed ‘barefoot doctors,’ usually middle school graduates trained in first aid, hiked through hamlets offering prenatal examinations and setting broken limbs. The service, essentially free, helped to almost eradicate sexually transmitted diseases in China and nearly doubled the country's life expectancy from 35 to 65 between 1949 to the mid-1970s. But in the early 1980s, the mainland began shifting from communism to capitalism, and peasants had to dig into their own tattered pockets to pay for health care. At the same time, cash-strapped local governments cut subsidies to rural hospitals and clinics, essentially privatizing them... City dwellers remain better-off, mostly because six in 10 of them have some form of health insurance. Only 10% of rural residents do, and most of them are government employees or live in wealthy coastal areas, where many work in factories.” (China's Failing Health System, *Time*, May 12, 2003)

This kind of deepening economic and social inequality now exists in many different aspects of Chinese society—which can mean the difference between life and death when an earthquake hits.

Get-Rich-Quick Development

Over the last several decades China has become more integrated into and subordinate to the world capitalist system. Foreign investments have poured into China. Fortune 500 companies with investments in Sichuan include Pepsico, Procter & Gamble, Toyota, United

Technologies, McDonalds, Lufthansa, Sony, Intel, Cisco Systems, and Archer Daniels Midland.

There has been all kinds of fast-paced “get rich quick” economic development. This has mainly been concentrated in the country’s eastern coastal areas where there are concentrated pools of cheap labor and access to shipping. But in recent years, this kind of rapid economic growth has branched out into interior areas, including into the cities and towns hit by the May 12 earthquake.

In many cases, such expansion has meant people being forcibly relocated. This push for rapid growth forces builders to move fast. And this has led companies and the government to trample on the rights of residents and ignoring building safety requirements. Policemen have been sent in to enforce evictions. And there have been several reports of people protesting demolitions and evictions by setting themselves on fire and committing suicide.

Five years ago, these massive renovations were mainly happening in large cities. Now they are going on in more medium and smaller cities—like Sichuan’s capital of Chengdu, about 145 miles from the epicenter of the earthquake. City officials there had announced plans to spend 10 billion yuan (US\$1.4 billion) to build a new town in its northern suburbs.

Thousands of smaller cities are sprouting up on formerly uninhabited pastureland. This rapid urbanization has transformed Sichuan into one of China’s biggest provinces with a population of 82 million. It is this kind of demolition and quick construction that has created conditions for rampant corruption, leading to the kind of slipshod building that people are now pointing to in the wake of the earthquake. It is these rural areas and smaller towns that suffered the greatest destruction from the earthquake.

This kind of economic development—driven by short-term gains, rapid growth, and cost minimization—has also factored into the building of dams in China. And now, in the wake of the earthquake, there is an extremely dangerous situation where shoddily-built dams are damaged, putting millions in harm’s way of potential flood waters—especially given continuing aftershocks.

There have been reports that hundreds of dams have been damaged by the earthquake. For example, the Zipingpu Dam, completed in 2006, was built over the objections of seismologists who were concerned about its proximity to major geological faults. After the earthquake, soldiers rushed to the dam after reports that it was developing cracks.

Crocodile Tears Covering Up a Criminal System

Some news commentators have said this earthquake is a “godsend” for the Chinese government—pointing to the fact that world political opinion has not been going well for China. Its brutal repression in Tibet captured headlines for weeks, just as China was getting ready for its mega-PR campaign around the Olympics. There were numerous protests as the Olympic torch made its way around the world.

Now the earthquake has given China an opportunity to turn public opinion more favorable to China’s reactionary regime. Top government officials quickly flew to the devastated areas, crying crocodile tears and putting on a show of concern for TV cameras—knowing this would be beamed not only throughout China but around the world. The Chinese government is highly aware that, especially in the wake of the cyclone in Myanmar, its handling of this

disaster is being closely watched, throughout the country and internationally. The storyline has been how competent, compassionate, and in control the rescue and relief efforts have been.

The rulers of China face a lot of necessity here—both domestically and internationally. They need to keep social control in the face of growing disparity and discontent. And they face a complex and changing economic and political polarization in the world as they try to press forward with their international ambitions. From the very beginning, the Chinese government has seen the Olympics as a way to create more favorable political conditions, both domestically and internationally.

The crocodile tears being shed by government officials after the earthquake only serve to cover up the real truth: The Chinese economy is deeply integrated into and subordinated to the global capitalist system. The development of capitalism in China has been and continues to be a living nightmare for hundreds of millions of people. And what China really needs is another revolution aimed at overthrowing the new capitalist ruling class, re-achieving national independence, and creating a genuine and truly liberating socialist society.

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