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1922: The Hong Kong strike

Anarchist Federation

September 10, 2006

In the 1920s prices quadrupled but wages did not. Revolt against foreign domination swept China but the arrogant merchant houses held on in Hong Kong. In January 1922 the bosses refused to concede a 40% wage rise and closed shop, so the Seamen's Union (SU) went on strike.

As ships arrived in Hong Kong their crews deserted and joined the strike. The Union had an armed militia that enforced the strike and blockaded all food by rail or sea. Tens of thousands of strikers and their families left Hong Kong for Canton where the local government housed, fed and paid them a wage. The bosses had to negotiate with the strike committee by telegraph!

The government declared the SU and three others illegal and brought in scab labour from China. The Union forced the railway to levy a 30% surcharge on all tickets to support the strike. On the 28th February the SU called all other workers to join them.

Disaster for the bosses! Not only rail workers and stevedores but bakers, cooks, clerks, coolies and servants joined the strike. The ruling class now had to cook its own food and queue to buy it. No clothes were washed, no shirts were ironed. Ministers

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had to wander government buildings delivering their own messages but there was no-one to carry out their orders. The army was called out and commandeered food and vehicles, workers were pressed into forced labour. With their workforce disappearing, the bosses banned anyone from leaving Hong Kong, which meant no-one could visit the graves of their ancestors in China, a fearful thing. A 'freedom' march against the ban led to confrontation, riot and massacre at Sha Tin.

With the Colony descending into – dare we say it, anarchy – government crumbling and business losses mounting (merchants lost \$500m during the strike, a massive sum), the bosses capitulated. A 20% wage rise was agreed, the union legalised, labour leaders freed, half-pay for the days on strike and compensation for the massacre victims. But because the bosses stayed in power, they prepared well and defeated an even bigger general strike three years later.