

About the current protest in Vietnam. I support and I do not support!

This article is analyzed from the perspective of Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg.

The "99 years" rally is taking place all across Vietnam. It is a protest in the immediate sense against the lack of consultation in the legislative proposal to rezone land and provide open leases for companies that relocate to new Special Economic Zones. There have been three short strike actions and larger protests, sometimes violent, in several cities. As part of the context we must acknowledge the protests and strikes entail a rise in nationalism, which perhaps is provoked by opportunists who would challenge the authoritarian state. This raises issues of positive and negative importance for the country.

After considering the situation, visiting the strikes, and reviewing a series of articles, I identify and question the single and most serious aspect of the problem: Why did the state move forward plans to lease land through the 99-year special zone without consulting the people?

This "99-year" event has prompted uproar and indignation across the country in large part because it involves China. From every layer of the society people who had knowledge about the legislation raised criticisms: lawyers, doctors, farmers and workers protested against the government. But the criticisms were amplified not only because the Vietnamese people would want to have a say in decisions about how they live, but also because opportunists were able to access a long-standing hatred of China and the criticisms had suggested that benefits to Chinese businesses are at the expense of the people.

"1000 years of Chinese invasion, 100 years of the French"

Nationalism has long existed in parallel with the development of the country.

Nationalism is often utilised within the government to support economic and political expansion in its various enterprises. But there is also the form of nationalism arising among the oppressed class in the face of authoritarian tendencies that prevail within the ruling party state.

Rosa Luxemburg argues for the analysis and development of Marxism including criticism of all forms of nationalism. Rosa's arrival in the Marxist revolution supported the class struggle of peoples oppressed by the bourgeoisie all over the world. Rosa's principle is "workers of the world unite!". According to Rosa, nationalism is a form of bourgeois thought that must be opposed by proletarian ideology and socialist aims. Almost all forms of nationalism have developed and are deeply rooted in the proletariat in cases that span the whole world. In some instances, this involves 'patriotism'. Some opportunist socialists opposed her revolutionary standpoint and Lenin developed his views on nationalism quite differently, distinguishing between nationalism among the oppressor nations which should be opposed by the revolutionaries and the nationalism of the oppressed nations, that revolutionaries should support. Lenin argued that revolutionary nationalism was needed to counteract imperialism and oppose the rule of the empires of the world.

Lenin's view easily led to one-sided bias toward the right and this cannot be reconciled with the current class struggle in Vietnam as Vietnam is no longer oppressed under colonialism, notwithstanding that it is now under an authoritarian state that contracts with the capitalist system. Whether all things should be attributed to class struggle on a national level is a wider question for discussion elsewhere.

But what is the purpose of the current protests? Their purpose as I see it at first was one that I am very supportive of, especially in the way they bravely stand against the government's lack of transparency. However, opportunists fostering patriotism and nationalism intervened and the protesters had not yet reached a level that could connect with the workers organised against the bourgeoisie, thus to that extent it remained an independent action by the peasantry to retain control of their land and we can surely understand. We would expect that in any case where peasant lands were sold to a wealthy official in Hanoi, without any compensation to the peasants using that land, then the same sort of protest would arise. But because of the nationalist antipathy against China in Vietnam, something that probably unites almost all Vietnamese, national feeling becomes an element of the case here. Those who fight the sale of land will "use" this element to inflame passions and gain support. This nationalist tendency should be opposed, even as the underlying action and its aims I would support. Looking in two directions at once is a very difficult policy to operate.

The opportunists saw a flicker of anger and they thought they could steer the people to where they wanted. They crept to the front and provoked the government. From the moment the opportunists entered, the protest was no longer a protest but a commandeered attack vehicle for those who want to destabilise the present government. If this was the purpose of the protest, it would not change the substantive original cause, but lead only to sabotage and a dysfunctionality that will slowly subside. An objective phenomenon, without actual support in the class, it will fade without resolution like the 2014 Binh Duong strike in South Vietnam's industrial parks.

To disentangle these issues we need to distinguish between three categories: demonstrations, sabotage and marches.

A march is a kind of celebration of something that is beneficial to oneself or to society, like that in 2015 with the LGBT parade in the pedestrian street of District 1, Ho Chi Minh City;

Protest strikes and demonstrations are the action of a group of people supporting a political or economic cause;

Sabotage is militant action, used especially for escalating political advantage, and it can be either armed interference aimed at overthrow of the government or part of a development of the widening struggle of the revolutionary class that Rosa Luxemburg calls the Mass Strike.

Right now, surprisingly with no attention from the wider press and public in Vietnam, including the opportunists, there are 300 workers in Nghe An on strike over a two-hour extension of their hours with no wage increase. While there may be less people involved, the issues are more clear-cut, their base is sound, and they have a cause.

Would this small economic demand escalate into nationalism or generalise into a political struggle based upon nation or class? The opportunists do not move into this strike, they do not see it as a place for sabotage that would access the national and patriotic elements they manipulate. Yet it is this kind of economic struggle that holds promise for a better Vietnam, even though it is not escalated into a political stage and is not, yet, directed to the Mass Strike strategy.

Only on the basis of the economic struggle of the working class would be possible to widen the struggle, build the Mass Strike and establish a new government, a new institution, or anything else, because that would by necessity have to build on the strength of the truly revolutionary class. Anti-government opportunism, and every country has such examples, rarely is revolutionary where the upper class people of the country also go in for sabotage, such as the United States with President Donald Trump for example. But without the revolutionary workers these opportunist actions only introduce chaos, it does not change anything substantial. Looking to France, workers' protests at the Amazon plant have boosted wages and added workers' welfare, albeit to a modest extent, with little change in their living conditions, but on their own strength.

Luxemburg argued that previous analyses of the Mass Strike had tended to separate economic and political struggles and in 1905, she said, the strike could initially start with what appear to be small economic demands but could rapidly generalise to become and challenge on a broader political level. This would only happen if led by the mass working class, it cannot happen if led by the opportunists because they have no actual political demand beyond opportunist sabotage. Sabotage here is not a political struggle that can feed back into weaker sections of the working class who would in turn strike over their economic grievance. Opportunist sabotage has no mass base and so will fade away.

The low profile of the left in Vietnam means the right-wing cause of economic inequality has become a pressing nationalist problem. The SEZ Special Economic Zones are no advantage for the nation because with less regulation and constraints upon capital, they often cause more worker exploitation. No workers movement can support them. They certainly attract capitalists from all over, not just China, but the jobs they bring are compromised and the workers have identified this drawback. At the present time, nationalists and opportunists have tried to take this moment and turn it into a protest against China and in effect bring the country back to a time when Vietnam was subject to colonial exploitation at the hands of the imperialists.

Vietnam has no left-wing opposition to offer other economic development policies.

The key to solving this problem is not the issue of nationalism but the problem of class struggle. Think about the needs of the movement, if the working classes of all nationalities around the world oppose the bourgeoisie?.

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