Sixty years after the Chinese Revolution: Lessons for the working class

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Today marks 60 years since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led by Mao Zedong seized power and proclaimed the Peoples Republic of China.

The revolutionary upheaval in China was part of a worldwide upsurge of the working class and oppressed masses that followed the end of World War II. As in other parts of Asia, Latin America and Africa, millions of workers and peasants were determined to throw off the shackles of colonial rule, which in China in the 1930s had taken the form of a brutal Japanese military occupation. Despite the immense scale of the struggle, however, the 1949 revolution was not socialist or communist. It did not bring the working class to power, but the peasant armies of Mao.

It is obvious today that China, in spite of its "communist" pretensions, is fully integrated into the global capitalist economy as its premier cheap labour platform. How else can one explain the congratulations sent to Beijing from two conservative American presidents—Bush senior and Bush junior—on the 60th anniversary of the Chinese revolution, or the decoration of New York's Empire State Building with red and yellow lights—China's revolutionary colours—to mark the event? Wall Street greatly appreciates the contribution of the Chinese police state in marshalling millions of workers to labour for global corporations, not to mention its huge purchases of US bonds.

These celebrations are not at variance with Maoism and the 1949 Chinese Revolution, but rather their logical outcome. While the CCP was formed in 1921 in response to the 1917 Russian revolution on the basis of Marxism, it was rapidly impacted by the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union. Under conditions where the first workers' state was isolated, the Stalin clique, representing the interests of a conservative bureaucratic apparatus, usurped power following the death of Lenin in 1924 on the basis of a rejection of socialist internationalism.

Stalin specifically attacked Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution which held that, in countries of a belated capitalist development such as Russia and China, only the working class was capable of fulfilling the national democratic tasks. Having taken power at the head of the oppressed masses, the proletariat would be compelled to implement socialist measures as part of the broader struggle for socialism internationally. For Stalin, Trotsky's Permanent Revolution, which had proven such an accurate theoretical guide to the events of 1917, became an intolerable threat to the privileged position of the bureaucracy, whose interests were summed up in the reactionary Stalinist theory of "Socialism in One Country".

In China, to further his own opportunist alliance with the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT), Stalin forced the young CCP to amalgamate with this bourgeois party. In a direct repudiation of the lessons of the Russian revolution, he declared that the Chinese revolution would involve two stages—first the completion of the national democratic tasks by the Chinese bourgeoisie, then socialism in the distant future. In the course of the 1925-27 revolution, however, the Chinese capitalist class proved even more venal than its Russian counterpart. Terrified at the revolutionary upsurge, the KMT drowned the CCP and the working class in blood—a defeat that only strengthened the hand of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow.

In the aftermath of 1927, two tendencies emerged inside the CCP. One turned to the Left Opposition, which had warned of the disaster prepared by Stalin, and embraced Trotsky's Permanent Revolution. The other, led by Mao, concluded that the problem was not Stalinism, but the organic incapacity of the working class to lead the revolution. The CCP expelled the Trotskyists and, under Mao's leadership, tore itself away from the urban working class and turned to the peasantry and guerrilla warfare.

In a remarkably perceptive article in 1932, Trotsky pointed out that Mao's "Red Army" was a movement of petty proprietors hostile to the working class. Their antagonism was rooted in the different class outlook of the proletariat and the peasantry—the former represented large-scale socialised production, the latter a section of the decaying middle classes opposed to urban industry and culture. On entering the cities, Trotsky warned, the peasant armies would suppress any independent movement by workers, with sections of the command, over time, becoming part of the bourgeoisie.

That analysis was vindicated in 1949. Like Stalinist parties internationally after World War II, the CCP initially attempted to form a coalition government with the bourgeois KMT, but failed. Encouraged by the emerging Cold War against the Soviet Union,

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KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek launched a desperate civil war against the CCP. The outcome was determined not by Mao's much overrated military capacities, but the profound economic and political weakness of the KMT regime, which virtually imploded. As Trotsky had warned, Mao's new "communist" government suppressed any independent initiative by the working class and protected private property. Nothing like the democratically-elected workers' councils or Soviets of the Russian revolution were established. The regime's abiding fear of the working class was expressed in its jailing of Chinese Trotskyists in 1952.

The new regime's guiding perspective was not socialism but Mao's "new democratic stage", involving a coalition with capitalist parties and figures that had not fled with Chiang to Taiwan. Its limited reforms—the nationalisation of the land and land reform, basic welfare measures and the outlawing of social evils such as prostitution and opium abuse—were bourgeois measures. Likewise, the wave of nationalisations amid the economic crisis generated by the Korean War was not "socialist", but paralleled the policies of national economic regulation in countries like India. The CCP simply carried through more consistently the program implemented by bourgeois leaders of the anti-colonial movement like India's Nehru.

Sharp divisions did emerge within the Maoist regime. The CCP was compelled to rely on former capitalists and urban professionals to run industry, as most of its peasant cadres knew nothing of modern production. This contained the seeds of the future conflict between the radicalism of Mao, who reflected the antagonism of the peasantry to urban industry, culture and above all the working class, and the so-called capitalist roaders, who concluded that large-scale industry and the market had to be given free rein. Both factions remained rooted in the nationalist framework of "Socialism in One Country", and were organically hostile to the socialist alternative for overcoming China's isolation—a turn to the international working class on the program of world socialist revolution.

Mao's utopian schemes for rural socialism, peasant communes and backyard industry produced one disaster after another, culminating in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that he launched against his factional rivals in 1966. When workers began to take matters into their own hands, a terrified bureaucracy rapidly buried its differences and brought in the army to suppress the working class. From then on, while the CCP leadership vastly expanded a cult around Mao to justify its repressive measures, his program of peasant radicalism was buried. After Mao died in 1976, the regime arrested the so-called Gang of Four and ditched the slogans of the Cultural Revolution.

While the middle class radicals of the 1960s and 1970s glorified the Cultural Revolution, the more conscious representatives of US imperialism recognised that the class character of "Red China" and the Soviet Union were not the same. The latter remained a workers state, albeit degenerated. At the height of the "Cultural Revolution" in October 1967, Richard Nixon wrote in the journal *Foreign Affairs* that his coming presidency would pull "China back into the world community—but as a great and progressing nation, not as the epicentre of world revolution".

In the same issue of *Foreign Affairs*, another analyst noted that Mao's regime was not so dissimilar to bourgeois governments brought to power by anti-colonial movements. The only difference was "the superior effectiveness of Chinese communism in promoting the aims historically associated with the capitalist mode of production and the social order built upon it… The originality of Maoism lies in the methods of mobilising the masses in the name of communism for the achievement of aims proper to any national-revolutionary movement: the industrialisation of China and the acquisition of military means (including nuclear ones) adequate to the pursuit of great-power politics."

In all its essentials, that is what has occurred during the past 30 years. Nixon met with Mao in 1972, laying the basis for an anti-Soviet alliance and China's initial opening to foreign capital. In 1978 Deng Xiaoping vastly accelerated foreign investment and the reestablishment of the capitalist market. This coincided with a turn by world capitalism in the late 1970s towards the globalisation of production and the establishment of cheap labour platforms. The inflow of foreign capital became a flood, after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre demonstrated the regime's willingness to use the most ruthless methods to suppress the working class.

What achievements are being celebrated today? The limited reforms of the 1949 revolution have been overturned as the CCP regime, and the grasping Chinese bourgeoisie that it represents, preside over a deepening social gulf between rich and poor. But while the CCP bureaucrats join hands with the representatives of global capitalism in toasting the Peoples Republic of China, they are casting a nervous glance over their shoulders at a Chinese working class that has enormously expanded and is closely integrated with workers around the world.

Above all, amid the worst global crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, they fear that the working class will begin to draw the political lessons of the 1949 revolution, reject the dead-end of Stalinism and Maoism, and return to the path of world socialist revolution. In China, that means building a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, to provide the essential revolutionary leadership.

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