The political lessons of the Thai protests

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Last week's military crackdown may have crushed anti-government protests in the streets of Bangkok but the underlying social tensions and political issues remain and will inevitably erupt, sooner or later, in new forms.

After four years of bitter feuding in the Thai ruling class, supporters of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra called the protests in mid-March to hit back against their factional opponents and the government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. The sharp divisions in the political establishment, however, opened the door to a broader movement dominated by protesters from the country's rural north and northeast.

As the demonstrations continued, the farmers, traders and small businesspeople began to find their own voice. The "Red Shirt" protesters pointed to the chasm between their lives and those of the wealthy who worked and shopped in Bangkok's commercial hub. They expressed their hostility to Thailand's traditional elites—the army, state bureaucracy and monarchy—that had ousted Thaksin, for whom they had voted and regarded, wrongly, as their champion.

These protesters showed ample courage and determination. Using little more than slingshots and petrol bombs, they drove back soldiers who tried to clear a protest site on April 10. Amid a mounting death toll, thousands stayed even as the army cut off supplies and marshalled troops and armoured vehicles for a final showdown. When the military moved in, groups of protesters denounced the "Red Shirt" leaders who surrendered, and torched buildings regarded as symbols of wealth and privilege. The rampage, however, only exposed the critical weakness of the movement—it lacked a program and perspective to advance its interests.

The events in Bangkok are a striking confirmation of the essentials of the Theory of Permanent Revolution elaborated more than a century ago by Leon Trotsky. Drawing on the experiences of the 1905 Revolution in Russia, Trotsky drew far-reaching conclusions: firstly, that the bourgeoisie in backward capitalist countries was organically incapable of leading a genuine struggle for democratic rights or addressing the needs of the peasantry; secondly, that the peasantry could not play an independent political role and inevitably followed either the bourgeoisie or the working class; and thirdly that the proletariat was the only social force able to lead the peasantry in a struggle against the Czar. Having achieved power, the working class would be compelled to make inroads into private property as an integral component of the world socialist revolution. The theory passed its first and most decisive test in the year of 1917, which produced the October Revolution and the world's first workers' state in Russia.

Much has changed in the past 100 years, but basic class dynamics under the outmoded profit system remain the same. In the absence of a politically conscious movement of the working class, the farmers, petty proprietors and rural poor flocked to Bangkok under the banner of the Thaksin and his United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD). For all his demagogy about "democracy," Thaksin's aim was limited to early elections and a government more conducive to his interests. When in office, Thaksin repeatedly demonstrated his contempt for democratic rights—journalists were threatened, hundreds of extrajudicial killings took place in his "war on drugs" and military operations were stepped up against Islamic separatists in the south.

Moreover, the telecom billionaire Thaksin is no more capable than the Oxford-educated Abhisit of resolving the deepening social crisis facing Thailand's rural masses. Thaksin's limited handouts and cheap health care were part of his government's efforts to stimulate the Thai economy in the wake of the devastating 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. Thaksin and the UDD leaders are staunch

defenders of the capitalist system that is the root cause of the financial uncertainty and indebtedness facing farmers and small businesspeople. Predictably, rather than extending the protests, the UDD confined and ultimately abandoned the demonstrations as the confrontation with the state apparatus intensified.

At the same time, the social grievances expressed by various protesters were never formulated into a political program—nor could they have been. As Trotsky pointed out, the peasantry is not a homogeneous class—its upper layers have ties with the bourgeoisie, while its lower ranks merge with the rural proletariat. Unlike the working class that expands with the development of capitalism, this class of petty proprietors is, in the long term, doomed by further economic development. In Thailand, the percentage of the population in agriculture has plunged from 70 percent of the total labour force in 1980 to 40 percent today.

Only the working class can assist the rural masses by abolishing the profit system that is the source of their oppression and providing financial and technical aid. In the latest events in Thailand, the working class played no independent role. Insofar as workers participated, it was as individuals under the UDD banner. Opponents of Marxism will no doubt cite this as further evidence that the proletariat is not a revolutionary class. But the transformation of the working class from an exploited mass into a revolutionary social force requires, above all, a consciousness of its class interests and is impossible without a party that educates, mobilises and leads it into battle. The lack of such a party in Thailand is the legacy of the far-reaching betrayals of Stalinism and its apologists that must now be overcome.

The Stalinist bureaucracy that usurped power from the working class in the Soviet Union promoted the reactionary program of "Socialism in One Country" and denounced Trotsky and socialist internationalism. In Asia, Stalin resurrected the discredited two-stage theory that assigned a progressive role to the national bourgeoisie, with disastrous consequences in the Chinese revolution of 1925-27. While Trotsky's Permanent Revolution was buried under a mountain of calumny and lies, the banal peasant radicalism of Mao Zedong was presented as Marxism and guerrilla warfare as the way forward for countries like Thailand.

The bankruptcy of Maoism is demonstrated above all by its "success" in China, where Mao's political descendants have transformed the country into the sweatshop of world capitalism. The political wreckage of Maoist guerrilla projects is evident throughout the region. In Thailand, the now defunct Communist Party turned to guerrilla warfare in the 1960s. Students radicalised by the political turmoil of the 1970s that culminated in the brutal 1976 massacre at Thammasat University were not turned to the working class, but to the countryside. Many returned disillusioned. The Maoists of yesteryear are today integrated into the Thai political establishment, including as "left" political advisers to both the UDD and its opponents.

Thailand, like the rest of the world, is being plunged into a new period of revolutionary upheaval by the crisis of global capitalism. The protests in Bangkok are a harbinger of events that will inevitably bring the working class in Thailand and internationally into struggle. As throughout the rest of Asia, the proletariat that was in its infancy at the turn of the twentieth century has vastly expanded in size and is integrated into global production processes. Global capital has transformed Thailand into the world's 10th largest auto exporter, with around 400,000 auto workers.

The challenge facing workers and young people in Thailand is the construction of a political party based on the program of socialist internationalism that can lead the working class in the struggles ahead. Above all, that requires the assimilation of Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution and the lessons of the key strategic experiences of the working class in Thailand and internationally during the twentieth century. That is only possible as an integral part of the world Trotskyist movement—the International Committee of the Fourth International.