

Ninety years since the founding of the Chinese Communist Party

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Last Friday, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) celebrated its 90th anniversary with great fanfare throughout the country, including films, exhibitions and countless other events. But the very character of the festivities demonstrated that the present-day party has nothing to do with communism, the working class, or indeed the CCP as it was founded in 1921.

The central theme was a disgusting celebration of Chinese nationalism and patriotism, designed to bury the party's origins as a fighting organisation of the working class based on socialist internationalism. The present CCP regime, which has presided over a staggering expansion of Chinese capitalism, certainly did not want workers drawing any lessons from the party's early history.

The CCP promoted "Red tourism" to the town of Yan'an, where Mao Zedong's peasant army had its headquarters in the 1930s, but not to the sites of the revolutionary upheavals of the working class in the 1920s. The fate of the grey brick house in industrial Shanghai where the CCP held its founding congress in 1921 is telling. It now sits in an up-market dining and entertaining district developed by Hong Kong property tycoons for the affluent Chinese middle classes.

The founding congress was attended by just 13 men, representing a membership of less than 60, and by Maring (Hendrick Sneevliet) on behalf of the Communist International. Chen Duxiu, the dean of the Peking University and editor of *New Youth*, was elected as leader. Formed as part of the powerful international response to the Russian Revolution of 1917, the party, even though small at the outset, was quickly thrown into the maelstrom of revolution and posed with the challenge of taking power.

Tragically, the bureaucratic degeneration of Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin in conditions of international isolation and internal backwardness became the chief obstacle to the subsequent Chinese revolution in 1925-27. Repudiating the lessons of the Russian Revolution, Stalin revived the Menshevik "two-stage" theory, subordinated the CCP to the bourgeois Kuomintang (KMT) on the basis that in backward

China the capitalist class must first lead the bourgeois revolution and take power, postponing any socialist revolution by the working class to the distant future.

The results were disastrous. The KMT under Chiang Kai-shek exploited the prestige of the CCP and the Soviet Union, then turned on the party in April 1927, murdering thousands of members and workers in Shanghai. Three months later, the debacle was repeated when Stalin subordinated the CCP to the "left" KMT. To counter criticism of these ruinous policies by the Left Opposition formed in 1923 by Leon Trotsky, Stalin ordered the battered CCP to stage an uprising in Canton in late 1927 that ended in catastrophe.

Two alternatives were starkly posed to the CCP. The first, taken by Chen Duxiu, was to draw the necessary lessons from the betrayals of Stalin and to form the Chinese Left Opposition. The second was pursued by Mao Zedong, who concluded that the working class was incapable of leading a revolution and turned to the peasantry. By submerging the CCP into a peasant guerrilla movement, Mao wrenched the party off its proletarian axis and transformed it into a radical movement of the rural petty bourgeoisie—a transformation that was to have profound implications.

In a far-sighted letter to Chinese supporters in 1932, Trotsky warned of the dangers facing the working class from Mao's peasant armies. "The peasant movement is a mighty revolutionary factor insofar as it is directed against the large landowners, militarists, feudalists and usurers. But in the peasant movement itself are very powerful proprietary and reactionary tendencies and at a certain stage it can become hostile to the workers and sustain that hostility already equipped with arms," he explained.

Those warnings were borne out in 1949. Having first tried to form a coalition with the KMT, Mao was forced to respond when Chang Kai-shek attempted to militarily crush the CCP. The CCP's victory was not so much the result of Mao's supposed military genius, but the political and economic implosion of the thoroughly corrupt KMT regime. On seizing power, the CCP suppressed any independent working class activity, jailed the Chinese Trotskyists and

implemented Mao's version of the two-stage theory—an alliance with those big businessmen who had not fled to Taiwan and Hong Kong and former KMT generals, including some who had massacred communists in 1927.

The subsequent evolution of China into capitalism's largest sweatshop flowed organically from the regime's foundations laid in October 1949. Article three of the CCP regime's founding constitution contained an explicit defence of capitalist property relations. Insofar as the CCP carried out nationalisations, the aim was not socialism, but a nationally-regulated economy, not dissimilar to measures carried out in avowedly capitalist post-colonial countries such as India. The nationalisation of the land was not, as Lenin had explained, a socialist measure, but a radical bourgeois policy to put an end to the feudal landlord class—a policy that ultimately created the basis for the full flowering of capitalism.

Despite various internal divisions, the CCP regime was based on the reactionary Stalinist utopia of “socialism in one country.” Cut off from the world economy, China lurched from one crisis to another. Mao's experiments in rural socialism created economic havoc and the disastrous famine of the late 1950s that killed tens of millions.

The last gasp of Mao's peasant radicalism was his attempt to smash his factional rivals by launching the misnamed “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” in 1966. The faction fight unexpectedly unleashed militant struggles of the working class, forcing the CCP to call a halt by sending in the army to suppress the movement. Having reached an economic dead-end, Mao signalled the CCP's embrace of imperialism by making a rapprochement with the US in 1972. He then began to open the door to ties with foreign corporations.

In the midst of the current anniversary celebrations, the official Xinhua news agency boasted: “History has proven that only the Communist Party of China can save China.” The ending of restrictions on capitalist exploitation in the three decades since Deng Xiaoping formally unleashed pro-market reforms in 1978 has certainly proved a boon for emerging Chinese capitalists, as well as international capital desperate for new infusions of cheap labour.

Since 1949, the CCP police-state has implemented bourgeois measures—integrating the country, nationalising the land, broadening education and building infrastructure—that the KMT proved completely incapable of achieving. The one guiding thread through all of the CCP's twists and turns has been its intense distrust and hostility to the working class, most graphically demonstrated in its brutal crackdown in Tiananmen Square in 1989 as soon as masses of workers began to voice their own class demands in the protests.

All the regime's present patriotic boasting cannot obscure the immense contradictions of Chinese capitalism, however. The CCP leadership is intensely aware that it is sitting on top of an economic and social time bomb—above all, the huge gulf between rich and poor. The feeling of insecurity and isolation was spelled out by CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao, whose party of 80 million now includes some of China's billionaires. He recently warned that ending the party's endemic corruption was the key to “winning or losing public support and the life or death of the party.”

These anniversary events could well be the party's last hurrah. Despite their extravagance, the regime is like a 90-year-old man watching in horror at the grave digger it has prepared—the vastly expanded proletariat that has grown from 8 million in 1949 to 500 million today. The only basis for overturning the police-state in Beijing is Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution that insists on the leading role of the working class in mobilising the oppressed masses to overthrow the CCP regime, establish a genuine workers state and implement socialist policies as part of the struggle for socialism internationally.

In preparation, workers and intellectuals in China must learn from the tragic lessons of the strategic experiences of the working class in the twentieth century in China and internationally—particularly the betrayals carried out by Stalinism and Maoism. A new genuine Marxist revolutionary party is needed, based on the lessons of the Trotskyist movement's protracted political fight against Stalinism. That means building a Chinese section of the International Committee of Fourth International.

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