

100 years since the founding of the Chinese Communist Party

Peter Symonds**1 July 2021**

This month marks 100 years since the founding congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) opened in a Shanghai girl's school in July 1921. Inspired by the 1917 Russian Revolution, it was an event of world historical significance, marking a critical turning point in the protracted struggle of the Chinese people against class oppression and imperialist domination.

The revolutionary conceptions that guided the founding of the CCP 100 years ago stand in stark contradiction to the hypocrisy and falsifications that characterise the official centenary celebrations, which are designed to boost the party's public standing and that of President Xi Jinping in particular.

Chinese television is being inundated with dramas depicting the history of the party. Seminars are being held in local neighbourhoods in cities and towns across the country. "Red tourism" is being pushed, with party branches, work units and local clubs encouraged to visit sites associated with the CCP's history, including the birthplace of Mao Zedong. Cinemas are required to screen, twice weekly, films glorifying the CCP, and theatres are staging so-called revolutionary operas. Eighty new slogans, such as "Follow the Party Forever" and "No Force Can Stop the March of the Chinese People," are plastered everywhere.

And the list continues, all trumpeting Chinese nationalism and the role of the CCP in ending the humiliating subordination of China in the 19th and 20th centuries to the imperialist powers and in building the Chinese nation. Schoolchildren are required to write essays on Xi's "Chinese Dream" to transform China into a great power on the international stage. Adult education classes offer discounts for essays praising Maoist ideology and "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism With Chinese Characteristics for a New Era."

Behind this nationalist extravaganza lies a distinct nervousness in the CCP apparatus that the centenary will lead to a critical questioning of the litany of falsehoods that comprises the official party history. On April 9, the Reporting Centre for Illegal and Unhealthy Information, a division of China's internet policing apparatus, added a new layer to its already extensive censorship by announcing a new facility to fight "historical nihilism." Citizens are encouraged to report online posts that allegedly distort the CCP's history, attack its leadership or ideology, or "slander heroic martyrs."

There is good reason for the concern, particularly under conditions where there is widespread disgust with the corrupt CCP bureaucracy, which nakedly represents the interests of the wealthiest layers of the population. The whole official celebration is built on the transparent lie that the party has remained true to its founding principles. In reality, the CCP long ago renounced the program of socialist internationalism on which it was established.

On July 23, 1921—not July 1, an anomaly the CCP has never corrected—the founding congress of the Chinese Communist Party opened in a dormitory of the Bowen Women's Lycee in the French Concession of Shanghai, later shifting to a private house. Present were 12 delegates—two

each from Shanghai, Beijing, Wuhan, Changsha and Jinan—as well as two representatives of the Third International or Comintern—Henk Sneevliet, known as Maring, and Vladimir Neiman, known in China as Nikolsky. Also present was a special representative of Chen Duxiu who could not attend but was elected as the CCP's founding chairman.

While the current CCP propaganda presents the congress as a Chinese affair, the founding of the Communist Party in China, as in other countries, reflected the enormous international impact of the Russian Revolution of October 1917 and the establishment of the first workers' state by the Communist Party led by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. The manifesto of the founding congress of the Third International in March 1919 made a direct appeal to the masses in the colonial countries, declaring: "Colonial slaves of Africa and Asia: the hour of proletarian dictatorship will also be the hour of your liberation."

Intellectuals and youth in China seeking a means to fight the country's semi-colonial oppression found the message immensely attractive. The Chinese revolution of 1911 made Sun Yat-sen, who had formed the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang (KMT), provisional president of a "Republic of China" but failed to unify the country or end imperialist domination. Moreover, in the aftermath of World War I, the major victorious powers at the Versailles Peace conference in 1919 endorsed the claims of Japan to Shandong Province, seized from Germany. When the decision became public, it provoked widespread protests and strikes beginning on May 4, 1919. What became known as the May 4 movement sprang from anti-imperialist sentiment but led to far broader intellectual and political ferment, in which Chen Duxiu and his close collaborator Li Dazhao played leading roles.

A recent article published by the state-owned Xinhua news agency in its "Lessons of the centenary of the CCP" series declares that the party's founding goal in 1921 was the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." It continues: "[The CCP] shoulders the historic tasks of saving the country, revitalizing it, enriching it and empowering it; will always be the vanguard of the Chinese nation and the Chinese people; will forge a historical monument, upon which its great achievements will be marked for thousands of years."

This glorification of Chinese nationalism is utterly alien to the conceptions that guided the founding of the CCP, which was bound up with the Russian Revolution and the intervention of the Third International in China. Those youth and intellectuals who emerged from the May 4 movement to form the party were won to the understanding that the fight against imperialism was inseparable from the international struggle to overthrow capitalism and establish socialism. Its goal was world socialist revolution, not the reactionary nationalist conception—"the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation"—that is the central element of Xi's "dream."

The documents of the first congress in 1921 elaborated the party's basic principles: the overthrow of capitalism by the working class and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, leading to the abolition

of classes, an end to the private ownership of the means of production, and unity with the Third International.

Any objective examination of the CCP today exposes the claim that it continues to fight for these goals. The CCP is not a party of the proletariat but of the bureaucratic apparatus that rules China. Even according to its own official figures, workers make up only 7 percent of party membership, which is overwhelmingly dominated by state functionaries and includes some of China's wealthiest billionaires. The state-run trade unions police the working class and suppress any opposition by workers to their oppressive conditions.

The claim that China, with its huge private corporations, stock markets and wealthy multi-billionaires, where private profit and the market dominate every aspect of life, represents "socialism with Chinese characteristics," is farcical. Xi's "dream" of a powerful Chinese nation has nothing to do with socialism or communism. It represents the ambitions of the super-rich oligarchs and wealthy elites that emerged with the restoration of capitalism in China under Deng Xiaoping from 1978 onward.

In the present policy of the Chinese government, there is not a trace of the internationalism that animated the founding of the CCP in 1921. The aim of the CCP today is not the overthrow of imperialism but for a prominent place in the world capitalist order. It does not advocate or support socialist revolution anywhere in the world, including above all in China, where it uses its huge police-state apparatus to suppress any, even limited, opposition.

The critical question facing workers, youth and intellectuals in China today wanting to fight for genuine socialism is what perspective will guide this struggle. To answer this question requires coming to grips with how and why the CCP was transformed from a revolutionary party fighting to overthrow capitalism into its diametrical opposite.

Three key turning points stand out in the party's lengthy and complex history.

The Second Chinese Revolution (1925–27)

The first is the Second Chinese Revolution of 1925–27 and its tragic defeat. The chief political responsibility for the crushing of this vast revolutionary movement lay with the emerging bureaucracy in Moscow under Stalin, which, under conditions of the defeat of revolutions in Europe and the continuing isolation of the workers' state, abandoned the socialist internationalism that underpinned the Russian Revolution and advanced the reactionary perspective of "Socialism in One Country."

In doing so, the Stalinist apparatus transformed the Third International from the means for advancing world socialist revolution into an instrument of Soviet foreign policy in which the working class in country after country was subordinated to opportunist alliances with so-called left parties and organisations.

The impact on the young and inexperienced Chinese Communist Party was immediate. In 1923, the Comintern insisted, against the opposition of CCP leaders, that the party dissolve itself and individually enter the bourgeois KMT, claiming that it represented "the only serious national revolutionary group in China."

This instruction negated the entire experience of the Russian Revolution, which was carried out in irreconcilable opposition to the "liberal bourgeoisie." It was a reversion to the two-stage theory of the Mensheviks who maintained that in the struggle against the Czarist autocracy in Russia the working class could only assist the liberal Cadets in establishing a bourgeois republic, putting off the fight for socialism—the second stage—to the indefinite future.

When the issue was discussed in the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in early 1923, Leon Trotsky was the only member to oppose and vote against entry into the KMT. Lenin had been incapacitated by a series of strokes—the first in May 1922. In his "Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Questions" written in 1920, Lenin had insisted that the proletariat, while supporting anti-imperialist movements, had to maintain its political independence from all factions of the national bourgeoisie.

In his Theory of Permanent Revolution, which guided the Russian Revolution, Trotsky demonstrated the organic incapacity of the national bourgeoisie to carry out basic democratic tasks, which could therefore be achieved only by the proletariat, as part of the struggle for socialism. He formed the Left Opposition later in 1923 to defend the principles of socialist internationalism against their renunciation by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The subordination of the CCP, and thus the Chinese working class, to the KMT was to have devastating consequences for the mass revolutionary movement of strikes and protests that erupted in 1925, triggered by the shooting of protestors in Shanghai by British municipal police on May 30. Despite the imposition of increasingly stringent restrictions on the political activities of CCP members inside the KMT—now led by Chiang Kai-shek—Stalin opposed any break from the KMT and continued to paint this bourgeois party in bright "revolutionary" colours.

In 1927, Trotsky exposed the falsity of Stalin's claim that the struggle against imperialism would compel the Chinese bourgeoisie to play a revolutionary role, explaining:

The revolutionary struggle against imperialism does not weaken, but rather strengthens the political differentiation of the classes... To really arouse the workers and peasants against imperialism is possible only by connecting their basic and most profound life interests with the cause of the country's liberation... But everything that brings the oppressed and exploited masses of the toilers to their feet inevitably pushes the national bourgeoisie into an open bloc with the imperialists. The class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the masses of workers and peasants is not weakened, but, on the contrary, is sharpened by imperialist oppression, to the point of bloody civil war at every serious conflict.

This warning was tragically confirmed. By subordinating the CCP to the KMT, Stalin became the gravedigger of the revolution, facilitating the April 1927 massacre of thousands of workers and CCP members in Shanghai by Chiang Kai-shek and his armies and the subsequent slaughter of workers and peasants by the so-called left Kuomintang in May 1927. Stalin then did an abrupt about-face and, amid the waning revolutionary tide, flung the battered Chinese Communist Party into a series of disastrous adventures.

These catastrophic defeats, which were to have such a far-reaching impact on the history of the 20th century, effectively marked the end of the CCP as a mass party of the Chinese working class.

Far from drawing the necessary political lessons from this tragic experience, Stalin insisted that his policies had been correct and made CCP leader Chen Duxiu the scapegoat for the defeats. Chen and other prominent CCP leaders, seeking answers to the questions posed by the Second Chinese Revolution, were drawn to Trotsky's writings and formed the Chinese Left Opposition and then a section of the Fourth International, which was established by Trotsky in 1938 in opposition to the monstrous betrayals of Stalinism in China and internationally.

Those that remained in the CCP defended Stalin and his crimes to the hilt, including the Menshevik two-stage theory, and retreated to the countryside. Mao Zedong, who was to eventually assume unchallenged CCP leadership in 1935, drew the anti-Marxist conclusion from the defeats of the 1920s that it was the peasantry, not the proletariat, that was the principal force in the Chinese revolution.

The Third Chinese Revolution of 1949

This was to have far-reaching consequences for the Third Chinese Revolution of 1949—the second major turning point in the CCP's history.

While Trotsky was keenly aware of the immense revolutionary-democratic significance of the struggles of the peasantry in China and of the necessity of the working class winning the support of the peasant masses, he delivered an acutely prescient warning over the implications of the attempt to substitute the peasantry for the proletariat as the social foundation of the revolutionary socialist movement.

In a 1932 letter to Chinese supporters of the Left Opposition, Trotsky wrote:

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 who forgets about the dual nature of the peasantry is not a Marxist. The advanced workers must be taught to distinguish from among 'communist' labels and banners the actual social processes.

The peasant armies led by Mao, Trotsky warned, could be transformed into an open enemy of the proletariat, inciting the peasantry against the workers and their Marxist vanguard represented by the Chinese Trotskyists.

The defeat of the KMT, the CCP's seizure of power and its proclamation of the People's Republic of China in October 1949 was the outcome of a momentous revolutionary upheaval in the world's most populous nation. It was part of the revolutionary movements and anti-colonial struggles that erupted around the world in the aftermath of World War II, reflecting the determination of working people to put an end to the capitalist system that had produced two world wars and the Great Depression.

As a result of the CCP's political domination, the Chinese Revolution was a contradictory phenomenon that is poorly understood. Following the line dictated by Stalin that resulted in defeats of the post-war revolutionary movements in Europe in particular, Mao and the CCP maintained the opportunist alliance with the KMT, forged in 1937 against the Japanese invasion of China, and attempted to form a coalition government. Only when Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT launched military action against the CCP did Mao finally call for its overthrow in October 1947 and for the building of a "New China."

The rapid collapse of the KMT regime over the subsequent two years testified to its internal rot and the bankruptcy of Chinese capitalism, which spawned widespread opposition, including a wave of strikes in the working class. The CCP, however, made no orientation to the working class and insisted that it passively wait for the entry of Mao's peasant-based armies into the cities. Following the Menshevik-Stalinist two-stage

theory, Mao's perspective of a "New China" was for a bourgeois republic in which the CCP would maintain capitalist property relations and alliances with remnants of the Chinese capitalist class, which for the most part had fled with the KMT to Taiwan.

Mao's program led to the deformation of the revolution. To maintain capitalist property relations meant the bureaucratic suppression of workers' demands and struggles. The Stalinist state apparatus that emerged out of the leadership of the peasant armies, and rested on them, was profoundly hostile to the working class. Workers were recruited to the CCP not to provide the working class with a political voice but to tighten its control over the working class.

Mao had claimed that the revolution's supposed "democratic" stage would last many years. However, in less than a year the CCP faced the threat of military attack by US imperialism, which launched the Korean War in 1950. As the war proceeded and China was compelled to intervene, it faced internal sabotage from layers of the capitalist class that regarded the US-led armies in Korea as their potential liberators. Confronting a possible US invasion, the Maoist regime was compelled to rapidly make inroads into private enterprise and to institute bureaucratic Soviet-style economic planning.

At the same time, fearing a movement of the working class, the Maoist regime cracked down on the Chinese Trotskyists, arresting hundreds of members, their families and supporters in nationwide dragnets on December 22, 1952 and January 8, 1953. Many of the most prominent Trotskyists remained imprisoned without charge for decades.

In a 1955 resolution, the American Trotskyists of the Socialist Workers Party [1] characterised China as a deformed workers' state. The nationalisation of industry and the banks, along with bureaucratic economic planning, had laid the foundations for a workers' state, but it was deformed from birth by Stalinism. The Fourth International unconditionally defended the nationalised property relations established in China. At the same time, however, it recognised the bureaucratically deformed origins of the Maoist regime as its dominant feature, making its overthrow through political revolution the only way forward for the construction of socialism in China, as an integral part of the struggle for socialism internationally.

The 1949 Chinese revolution is justifiably regarded by Chinese workers and youth as an enormous advance. It ended direct imperialist domination and exploitation, and, in response to social aspirations of the revolutionary movement of workers and peasants, the CCP was compelled to eliminate much of what was socially and culturally backward in Chinese society, including polygamy, child betrothal, foot binding and concubinage. Illiteracy was largely abolished, and life expectancy increased significantly.

Nevertheless, the CCP's Stalinist perspective of "Socialism in One Country" led in a very short space of time to an economic dead-end and China's international isolation after the Sino-Soviet split of 1961–63. Within the framework of national autocracy, the Maoist leadership was incapable of finding a solution to the problems of China and its development.

The result was a series of bitter and destructive internal factional disputes as the CCP thrashed around for a way out of its dilemmas. This led to one disaster after another that was bound up with the party's nationalist perspective and Mao's attempts to overcome the problems of China's development by means of subjective and pragmatic manoeuvres.

These included Mao's catastrophic "Great Leap Forward," which produced mass famine, and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which was neither great, proletarian nor revolutionary. Mao's attempt to mobilise students, elements of the lumpen proletariat and peasants into the Red Guards as a means of settling accounts with his rivals proved an unmitigated disaster. It was brought to an end with the use of the army to suppress workers who went on strike.

The turn to capitalist restoration in the 1970s

Chinese workers must draw a sharp distinction between the necessary and justified revolution of 1949 and the reactionary character of the Cultural Revolution, whose turmoil only set the stage for the third major historic turning point—capitalist restoration and the systematic dismantling of the gains of the 1949 Chinese Revolution.

Various neo-Maoist tendencies falsely seek to portray Mao as a genuine socialist and Marxist revolutionary, whose ideas were betrayed by others, particularly Deng Xiaoping, who introduced initial pro-market reforms in 1978.

In reality, it was Mao himself who opened the road to capitalist restoration. Facing mounting economic and social problems and the threat of war with the Soviet Union, Beijing forged an anti-Soviet alliance with US imperialism that laid the basis for China's integration into global capitalism. Mao's rapprochement with US President Richard Nixon in 1972 was the essential pre-condition for foreign investment and increased trade with the West. In foreign policy, the Maoist regime lined up with some of the most reactionary US-based dictatorships, including those of General Augusto Pinochet in Chile and the Shah in Iran.

Without the relations with the US providing access to foreign capital and markets, Deng would have been unable to launch his sweeping "reform and opening" agenda in 1978 that included special economic zones for foreign investors, private enterprise instead of communes in the countryside, and the replacement of economic planning with the market. The result was a vast expansion of private enterprise, especially in the countryside, the rapid rise of social inequality, looting and corruption by party bureaucrats, growing joblessness, and soaring inflation that led to the national wave of protests and strikes in 1989. Deng's brutal suppression of the protests, not only in Tiananmen Square but in cities throughout China, opened the door for a flood of foreign investors, who understood that the CCP could be relied on to police the working class.

The reactionary role of Maoism finds its sharpest expression in the horrific consequences internationally of its Stalinist ideology of "Socialism in One Country" and "bloc of four classes," subordinating the working class to the national bourgeoisie. In Indonesia, these politics left the working class politically disarmed in the face of a military coup that led to the extermination of an estimated one million workers. Maoism has led to similar defeats and betrayals in South Asia, the Philippines and Latin America.

Xi and other Chinese leaders boast of the economic achievements of what is absurdly called "Socialism with Chinese characteristics."

That they are compelled to still speak of socialism and even proclaim that their capitalist policies are guided by Marxism is testament to the enduring identification of the Chinese masses with gains of the 1949 revolution. China's staggering economic development over the past three decades reflect in a contradictory way the impact of the Chinese revolution. It would not have been possible without the far-reaching social reforms introduced by that revolution.

To understand the significance of the Chinese revolution, one only has to ask the question: Why has such development not taken place in India? The contrast between the two countries has found sharp expression in the COVID-19 pandemic, which was contained by China early on, even as it spreads uncontrollably in India, pushing its death toll past the 400,000 mark.

China's undeniable economic development has vastly expanded the ranks of the working class, while boosting the social conditions of significant segments of the working population.

This development notwithstanding, China today faces all the contradictions and consequences of the turn to capitalism that cannot be resolved within the framework of either Maoism or the current policies of the ruling CCP.

China faces a terrible price for its integration into the world capitalist economy and the massive influx of foreign capital and technology to exploit cheap Chinese labour. Economic growth has only exacerbated the contradictions of Chinese capitalism, generating immense social tensions and fuelling a profound political crisis.

While China's per capita GDP has risen, it is still well behind many other nations and is ranked only 78 in the world. This year, as the centenary celebrations loomed, Xi boasted that China had abolished "absolute poverty," but the statistics, based on a very austere measure, are highly questionable and poverty remains widespread. Moreover, the gulf between rich and poor is higher than ever, with the staggering wealth of China's multi-billionaires continuing to grow amid the COVID-19 pandemic that has heavily impacted on the broader population.

In the final analysis, the historical questions that motivated the Chinese revolution—independence from imperialism, national unification and breaking the grip of the comprador capitalists—remain unresolved.

Indeed, they are posed today in an even more acute form, with China's capitalist economy dependent upon a global capitalist market and facing military encirclement by imperialism, led by the United States. Taiwan, which is developing as an increasingly hostile national state, has emerged as the flashpoint for a potential global war. The entire perspective advanced by Maoism of independent national development is thoroughly exhausted.

Within China itself, the CCP promotes nationalism based on the Han majority. While imperialism's reactionary propaganda about a Uyghur "genocide" is deserving of contempt, the CCP's appeal to nationalist sentiments plays no progressive role whatsoever in what is a vast, multilingual and multi-ethnic society.

In all its contradictions and complexity, China's history has confirmed the thesis of Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution that in countries with a belated capitalist development, subjected to imperialist oppression, the basic democratic and national tasks can be accomplished only by means of a socialist revolution, led by the working class and supported by the peasantry, as part of the fight for world socialism.

This path of world socialist revolution is anathema to the CCP and the capitalist layers it represents.

The CCP has no solution to the sharpening social tensions and growing signs of opposition other than the repressive methods of Stalinism—blanket censorship, arbitrary arrests and the violent crushing of protests and strikes. The CCP itself is riven with corruption and factional feuding that threaten to tear it apart. Xi has emerged as a Bonapartist figure, balancing between rival factions that rely on him to hold the party together. The glorification of Xi, who is routinely referred to as the "centre" and hailed as second only to Mao, does not stem from personal political strength, but rather reflects the deep crisis wracking the party.

All this is compounded by US imperialism's increasingly aggressive confrontation with China over the past decade, initiated by President Obama and accelerated under Trump and now Biden. Having helped fuel China's decades of economic growth, all factions of the American ruling class now regard China as the chief threat to US global hegemony and are preparing to use all methods, including war, to subordinate China to the "international rules-based system"—that is, the post-World War II order established by Washington.

The CCP's perspective of "peaceful coexistence" with imperialism and China's peaceful rise to assume its place within the world capitalist order is in tatters. Biden, backed by both Democrats and Republicans, is marshalling US allies and pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into arming for war against China. At the same time, Washington is seeking to

exploit tensions within China, fuelled by the CCP's heavy-handed suppression of ethnic separatist tendencies, in a bid to weaken and fracture the country.

Confronted with the looming danger of a catastrophic war, the CCP leadership conceives of China's defence in military and foreign policy terms, building up its armed forces and promoting its "Belt and Road Initiative." On the one hand, it attempts to appease US imperialism and strike a new deal. On the other, it seeks to engage in a futile arms race and the whipping up of nationalism and chauvinism that can only end in disaster. Having long ago renounced the socialist internationalism on which it was founded, the CCP is organically incapable of making any appeal to the international working class to build a unified anti-war movement based on the fight for socialism.

None of the huge problems confronting humanity—war, ecological disaster, social crises or the COVID-19 pandemic—can be resolved within the framework of capitalism and its outmoded division of the world into competing nation-states. The challenge confronting workers, intellectuals and youth in China who are seeking a progressive solution is to reject the foul nationalism whipped up by the CCP apparatus and return to the path of socialist internationalism that formed the basis of the party's founding in 1921.

That means reforging the link between the Chinese working class and the world Trotskyist movement, embodied in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). We urge workers and youth to turn to a study of the history of the Fourth International and the political lessons of its decades-long struggle for Marxist principles in opposition to Stalinism and its lies and historical falsifications. Above all, we call on you to contact the ICFI and begin the process of establishing a Chinese section to fight for its revolutionary perspective.

Endnotes:

[1] The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the United States led the fight to form the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1953 against an opportunist tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel that rejected Trotsky's characterisation of Stalinism as a counter-revolutionary tendency and claimed that the Stalinist bureaucracies in Moscow and Beijing could be pressured to project a revolutionary orientation. In 1963, the SWP abandoned the struggle against opportunism, broke from the ICFI and unified with the Pabloites on an unprincipled basis without any discussion of the political differences that had emerged in 1953.



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