Workers against imperialism: the May 4th movement

Workers in the Chinese revolution

The following article by Liz Millward tells the story behind the Chinese revolution of 1927, of how a working class developed in China, how its struggles interlaced with those of the nationalist bourgeoisie, how a young Chinese Communist Party misled those struggles and why, ultimately, they were defeated. It was first published in *Workers' Liberty* 12-13, August 1989.

AT the beginning of the 20th century, China bore little relationship economically or politically to the countries of the west. The vast majority of the population were peasants — by the 1920s over 90% of the population still lived outside towns and only 6% lived in cities of over 50,000. The urban proletariat was tiny, largely concentrated in Shanghai, where 300,000 workers made up perhaps 20% of the workforce, although the proletariat in all of China formed only 0.5% of the population. Other concentrations of workers included 200,000 in Canton and Hong Kong, and 100,000 in and around Wuhan. About half the proletariat (44%) worked for foreign-controlled enterprises.

Until 1912 the country was governed by an Emperor, and a network of civil servants. In addition, with the exception of the new foreign industries, production and distribution was highly centralised, with vast public works (notably irrigation for agriculture) and food distribution in times of shortage. Peasants produced handicrafts with few industrially manufactured goods. Foreign intervention disrupted the balance of this economy by introducing cheap manufactured goods and upset-ting central organisation.

Industry was largely foreign-owned and run from "concessions" policed by foreign powers in the big cities and sea-ports. China was being forced to trade at the point of a gun. Foreign-imposed tariff laws did not permit China to build its own industrial base.

China became chaotic and divided, the vital public works fell into further disrepair, and local warlords ruthlessly exploited the peasantry who had now no form of redress. Sun Yat-sen ruled in South China, and various warlords in the north, with key cities (like Shanghai) under almost total foreign control.

China's enforced entry into World War One was on the orders of the allies, who wanted an excuse to seize German concessions and shipping in China. The attempt by the allies to hand these concessions over to Japan at the end of the war — to whom they were "given" by the great powers who signed the Versailles Treaty — sparked huge protests in 1919 — the so-called May 4th movement. Chen Tu-hsiu, a professor at Peking university, initiated a demonstration in Peking of 5,000 students. This spread to include over 100,000 people in 16 provinces. As a result, the Chinese government refused to sign the Versailles Treaty. The May 4th movement showed that nationalism was not just the prerogative of foreign-educated intellectuals like Chen and Sun, but had a real grip on the minds of ordinary people.

In addition to anti-imperialism, the intellectuals hated the warlords' militarism. The warlords were financially tied to foreign powers and also used the foreign-policed concessions as a place of retreat from the fighting on their home ground.

The imperialist powers had created a chaotic and divided China, and wanted to retain it in that condition. Different imperialists supported different warlords, using them to attack Sun Yat-sen. Sun appealed to America for help with his programme of democratic construction, but America, like the other powers, was interested in China mainly as a market. A united China, especially one united under Sun's anti-imperialist, anti-militarist programme would lead to the expulsion of the foreign powers, and maybe the reclaiming of the territories seized by those powers (e.g. Hong Kong).

Western-style democracy under Sun Yat-sen failed under these conditions and he abandoned it even as an idea, re-organising his nationalist forces for a period of "tutelage" (in reality dictatorship) with the help of the only country who would answer his appeal, Russia. Far from wanting to extend Russia's exploitation of China, Lenin's government had pledged to return the territories occupied by the Tsars. Even though Sun Yat-sen did not favour communism for China, he agreed to negotiations with the Soviets.

The bourgeois nationalists

OUT of the chaos of China's economic, political and social situation flowed a desire for change. The opposition movements were to divide into two main currents, both developed with the help of Russia and the Communist International. These currents were nationalism and communism. The nationalists, initially led by Sun Yat-sen and later Chiang Kai Shek, wanted to re-unify the country, to end the domination of the imperialist powers and to bring Western political structures to China.

By the late 1920s these ideas had simply deteriorated into the desire to unify China militarily, and democracy which had been tried very briefly had fallen victim to corruption and been abandoned.

The opium trade (forced on China by Britain in the 19th century), had drained the country of its wealth (silver), and China was forced to borrow heavily from the west to finance further trade it did not want.

The lives of the peasant majority were not easy; a 1927 survey showing that more than half of all Chinese peasants were either partial or full tenants paying up to half or more of their produce as rent, or were agricultural labourers receiving irregular or minimal pay. Despite this, the landlords were subject to governmental control. Periodic peasant uprisings, which led to government investigations, prevented the worst excesses of the landlords, and centralised food distribution prevented the worst of the periodic famines.

No-one was allowed to prevent the exploitation and degradation of Chinese labour in the foreign-owned factories, and the profits from those industries went out of China, bringing no benefits to the Chinese. Between 1851 and 1855, the excess of imports over exports from China was over £175 million, and China was forced to borrow money to buy European iron and steel. In 1894 Japan tried to annex part of China but was stopped by Russia, France and Britain. Yet Japan was "given" a treaty port and "indemnities" of £34.5 million — China was then lent £48 million by British and European banks to pay this! The money had to be paid back out of taxes generated by the peasants, putting them under a huge burden.

For the Western ports, China was a market, its Manchu Emperors to be propped up or not, depending on the benefits to Western capitalism. Its economy (oriental despotism), previous-ly balanced, if primitive, was in tatters, and its people exploited as cheap labour and taxpayers for European loans. Yet it was this exploitation, and the concentration of the workers in industry which was to sow the seeds of the coming revolution.

Continued on page 16