

The first revolution

THE Manchu dynasty collapsed in the late 19th century, to be replaced in 1912 by a republic under the (initial) leadership of Sun Yat-sen. Sun, like many of China's intellectuals, had been educated abroad. He wanted to bring China into the 20th century by adopting Western ideas and political structures. He was primarily a liberal, a democrat and a nationalist, seeing the foreign domination of China as the greatest evil. Sun was aided by Yuan Shih-K'ai, the former imperial commander-in-chief, who bargained with the republicans for the title of First President of the Republic. Since he was the real power, he got the title.

The parliament created by the republic was deeply corrupt, its members intent, above all else, on feathering their own nests. It did not take long for Yuan to show his true intentions — the attempt to found a new imperial dynasty with himself as Emperor. But Yuan, having broken with the republican constitution, could not maintain an empire. Other military men seized the chance to set themselves up in opposition, in different parts of China, supported by the various foreign powers under the principle of divide and rule.

In these conditions, a Communist Party was founded in 1921 by a small group of intellectuals led by Chen Tu-hsiu, the founder of the May 4th movement.

The original group of intellectuals expanded into a powerful workers' movement in a few short years. Its aims were to lead the national democratic revolution and to "organise the proletariat and to struggle for the establishment of the dictatorship of the workers and peasants, the abolition of private property, and the gradual attainment of a communist society". In addition, the CCP had a number of "objectives" including "the overthrow of military cliques, and the establishment of internal peace ... the removal of oppression by international imperialism and the complete independence of the Chinese nation [including self-determination of national minorities like Tibet] ... legislation for workers, peasants and women..." (from *Manifesto of Second National Congress*, July 1922).

So some of the aims of both groups were common to both nationalists and communists. Under the influence of the CI, common ground led to common work.

The future of post-revolutionary workers' Russia was inexorably tied to the overthrow of capitalism in Europe and America. Lenin and Trotsky insisted that to survive, the new Soviet Union needed revolution in the more advanced capitalist countries, and that such revolutions must be made by the workers of those countries. The Third International (Comintern) existed to help the revolutionary parties of those countries, and equally to guide the policies of the new workers' state.

The second congress of the International, held in Petrograd in 1920, turned to the colonial and semi-colonial countries primarily to further the spread of revolution in the West. Lenin said that countries like Britain would collapse if they were deprived of their markets in China, Africa and India, and that as long as capitalism could turn a super-profit in the colonies and semi-colonies abroad, it could afford to buy off the workers at home. Deprived of these markets, capitalism would inevitably turn on its native industries and, in fact, upon itself.

The first task of the proletarian parties in

colonial and semi-colonial countries was therefore to drive out the imperialists, and the *Theses of the Second Congress* on "The Colonial and National Question" deal with this issue. But the theses go further, looking at the prospects for socialist revolution in colonial countries, and the relationship between the proletariat, its parties, and the peasantry. The nationalist, anti-imperialist revolution is seen as broadly analogous to the bourgeois revolutions in Western democracies, and the role of the proletarian party is therefore similar — to work with the revolutionary nationalist forces, but to maintain class independence. Although the nationalists are revolutionary against imperialism, they will be counter-revolutionary against the workers, so the task of communists is to foster no illusions about the nationalists or the nationalist revolution, and not to subsume the communist parties in the nationalist struggle. Therefore, "the Communist International may enter into a temporary union with the bourgeois-democracy of colonies and backward countries, but not intermingle with it, and invariably preserve the independence of the proletarian movement even in its most primitive form."

The theses identified two main revolutionary groups — one, the peasantry and proletariat, who form the mass of the population but who have been suppressed — and, two, the educated middle class who express the latent "spirit of revolt." "Foreign domination has obstructed the free development of the social forces; therefore its overthrow is the first step towards a revolution in the colonies. So to help overthrow foreign rule in the colonies is not to endorse the nationalist aspirations of the native bourgeoisie, but to open the way to the smothered proletariat there."

So, "the foremost and necessary task is the formation of communist parties which will organise the peasants and workers and lead them to revolution... Such parties should co-operate with the bourgeois nationalist parties but always struggle against ... control and help to develop class consciousness amongst the working masses of the colonies."

"The revolution in the colonies is not going to be a communist revolution in its first stages. But if, from the outset, the leadership is in the hands of a communist vanguard, the revolutionary masses will not be led astray, but go ahead through the successive periods of development of revolutionary experience. Indeed, it will be extremely erroneous in many oriental countries to try to solve the agrarian problem according to pure communist principles. In its first stages, the revolution in the colonies must be carried on with a programme which will include many petit-bourgeois reform clauses, such as division of land, etc. But from this it does not follow that the leadership of the revolution will have to be surrendered to the bourgeois democrats. On the contrary, the proletarian parties must carry on vigorous and systematic propaganda of the soviet idea, and organise peasants' and workers' soviets as soon as possible. These soviets will work in co-operation with the soviet republics in the ultimate overthrow of the capitalist order throughout the world."

In fact the leadership of the revolution was surrendered to the bourgeois democrats. When Stalin came to power, the policy of co-operation and united front with 'independence' for the CP became an article of faith to be adhered to even though the objective conditions in China had changed. When the united front was

negotiated with Sun Yat-sen, on Sun's terms, it made sense. The CCP was a tiny force. But things changed, and changed quickly.

The founding of the CCP

THE CCP was founded officially in 1921 with the help and support of the Comintern. Discussions between CI representative Voitinsky and leading left activists and intellectuals began in 1920 in Peking when they met Chen Tu-hsiu, then producing *New Youth*, a Marxist journal. The political situation was in a state of flux, with anarchists and nationalists far more numerous than Marxists. Voitinsky proposed the formation of a communist party to organise the Marxists and increase Marxist propaganda and spread information about the Soviet revolution.

In May 1920, a provisional central committee was established, and in August of that year it was agreed to proceed to the formal organisation of a party, it was hoped within 12 months. The first tasks of the group were to build up organisation, and to make propaganda. A new journal, *The Communist*, was started, alongside journals for the labour, youth and women's movements. In addition, a Socialist Youth League was established by Chen Tu-hsiu and Chan T'ai-lei. Activity spread to the other major cities, with small groups being formed in Peking, Shanghai, Wuhan, Changsha, Canton and Tsinan, with a further group established in Paris in February 1921.

From the first, the communists oriented towards the working class (although Chen did have links with progressive Shanghai industrialists). In October 1920, the CCP organised its first industrial union, the Shanghai Mechanical Workers Union. In January 1921, the communists established a committee of the workers' movements in Shanghai, and began a workers' school. Similar initiatives were pursued everywhere the communists were organised, including the founding of the Hong Kong Chinese Seamen's Union, which was to launch the first really militant national strike 12 months later.

In all of this work the communists co-operated with other radicals and anarchists where their aims coincided, but already communist influence was far greater than their numbers indicated.

In 1921 the Communist Party was officially founded, organised as a Leninist party, having approximately 50 members — plus several hundred youth activists. It had a central

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committee of three, with Chen Tu-hsiu as general secretary. The first programme of the party called for the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement with the dictatorship of the proletariat and pledged the party to devote itself to labour organisation, propaganda and recruitment. This programme was to be filled out during the following year, and a more comprehensive, detailed strategy was adopted at the 1922 Congress. But the 1921 Congress did take a firm line on co-operation with Sun Yat-sen's nationalist party. In contrast to the policy of the united front which was to follow, the First Congress decided to criticise Sun, and remain independent of the nationalists.

Initial labour movement

In mid-1921 the party established a Labour Secretariat in Shanghai, with branches in Wuhan, Tsinan, Peking, Canton and Changsha. The Secretariat was influential in a number of strikes for better conditions, the first being the October 1921 strike against the British-American Tobacco Company in Shanghai. In January 1922, the Chinese Seamen's Union struck in Hong Kong. The union involved 10,000 workers. Other workers in Hong Kong and Canton supported the strike (as did Sun Yat-sen), as well as labour in Shanghai and elsewhere. By February some 100,000 workers were involved, virtually paralysing Hong Kong and forcing the British

to concede the right of the union to continue, and substantial wage increases.

The communists then initiated a national General Labour Union which held its first congress in Canton in May 1922. The congress claimed to represent about a fifth of China's workers, and advanced communist-inspired slogans for an 8-hour day, mutual aid and the overthrow of the imperialists and warlords. In the year following the Hong Kong-Canton Strike of 1922 the communists reportedly led 150,000 workers in more than 100 strikes.

The first wave of strikes climaxed in February 1923 with the crushing of the Peking Hanchow Railroad strike where the communists, attempting to deal with the warlord Wu P'ei-fu against another, Chang Tso-lin, organised railway workers into a national union, calling a conference in Chengchow on 1 February 1923. Wu felt the communists had outlived their usefulness and banned the meeting, causing a 10,000-strong protest strike. On 7 February, Wu's men fired on strikers up and down the railroad, killing at least 40, injuring more than 300 and then dismissed thousands from their jobs. It is likely that Wu was supported by the British in smashing the strike and the union, providing an object lesson for the young labour movement on the subject of alliances, and temporarily halting its development.

The communists were far more influential than their numbers would suggest. By mid-1922 only about 120 communists were in touch with the national organisation, although these were found in 16 provinces. Official party structures existed in at least 10 regions, and apart from work in the labour movement, these party organisations organised workers' schools, produced journals and attempted to organise young people, students and women. There were also attempts to organise amongst the peasantry. The party was organised along Leninist lines, being democratic centralist, and at the 1922 Congress adopted an organisational framework modelled on that of the Russian CP of 1919.

The 1922 Congress also advanced for the first time the idea of an alliance with the Kuomintang (KMT, also spelled Guomindang — Sun Yat-sen's party). This united front, in line with the CI theses, was to be around the common aims of struggling against militarism and imperialism. But the CCP was determined to be an equal partner with the KMT, to retain its independence, and continue its work with the labour movement, with the overthrow of capitalism as its ultimate goal. In fact, the united front was realised in a very different form, and against the spirit of the Second Congress, and against the views of leading communists like Chen.

In the early 20s it looked as if Sun Yat-sen had much more chance of ridding China of foreign powers than the communists did. So the Russian revolutionaries negotiated with Sun directly, offering him much-needed help. By the time it was to become clear how much the Chinese workers were capable of, Stalin was in control of the CI and was concerned only with defending "socialism in one country" — Russia.

The CI approached Sun Yat-sen for a united front between the CCP and the KMT in mid-1922. Sun refused, but, not wishing to lose the Russians' aid or his one potential ally in a hostile world, offered to let the communists join the KMT on an individual basis, submitting to his discipline. He also said that he saw no role for communism in China, and Maring, accepting all his terms on behalf of the CI, agreed with him. When Maring reported the negotiations to the Chinese communists, they were not so keen, and at a meeting of Chen and other leading communists in August 1922, the terms of the united front "from within" were rejected.

Eventually, the communists agreed to join the nationalists, watering down Sun's harshest conditions, and retaining the right to membership of their own party. But Maring had to threaten CI discipline before the decision to join the nationalists was agreed. The united front "from within" was thus a compromise — with the CCP able to maintain itself, and a limited amount of independence, but with the real power in Sun Yat-sen's Kuomintang to which the communists had now agreed to submit.

In fact, as time showed, the compromise was not really acceptable to either party, and it was to lead to political catastrophe when exposed to Stalin's insistence on "two stage" revolution, and his characterisation of the KMT as a "bloc of four classes", which would unite the people in the fight against imperialism. This characterisation, arrived at to justify the continuation of



Murdered Chinese communists, 1927