

# The Chinese revolution 1925-1927



A short account of the mass struggles in China from 1925 up to the Shanghai insurrection of 1927 and its crushing by the nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek, who was supported by the Chinese Communist Party.

## China and world imperialism

The old Asiatic mode of production and its presiding Manchu dynasty were already in decay when the great imperialist powers of the second half of the nineteenth century imposed their iron grip on the Chinese economy. Britain, France, and later Japan and the USA treated China as a colony, carving it up in their own interests and using it as a massive outlet for their surplus commodities. The Opium Wars of the 1840s and 1850s were a classic expression of imperialism's military-economic subjugation of the pre-capitalist regions of the world, which was so vital for the expansion of the world market towards the end of capitalism's ascendant phase. The stranglehold of imperialism greatly accelerated the decline of the old Asiatic system, while making it impossible for any significant native capitalist development to take place. The defeat of the Taiping Rebellion in 1865 sounded the death-knell of any possible bourgeois revolution in China.

When the corrupt Manchu dynasty was finally overthrown by Sun Yat-sen's military uprising in 1911, it was already too-late to carry through the tasks of the bourgeois revolution - national independence, national unification, political democracy, agrarian reform - which Sun's party, the Kuomintang, had inscribed in its programme. In a world already divided up by the imperialist powers and hurtling towards the catastrophe of 1914-18, any attempt at a 'national revolution' immediately became an arena for intensified inter-imperialist rivalries in which the local bourgeoisie could only act as a pawn in the hands of the major powers.

Within weeks of the 1911 'revolution', China disintegrated into an agglomeration of satrapies dominated by different war-lords, who in turn were the local lieutenants of the imperialist powers. Sun's project of a united, prosperous, democratic China faded away like an opium dream.

## China and the world revolution

The principal tragedy of the Chinese Revolution was the fact that, just as China came too late into the world capitalist market, so the Chinese proletariat was launched into its decisive struggles against

capital at a time when the world revolutionary wave which arose out of the 1914-1918 war was already on the decline.

The first world war had given an enormous impetus to the development of Chinese industry, since China was able to take advantage of the demands of the war while the pressure of the imperialist powers was temporarily relaxed. This in turn accelerated the development of a small but highly concentrated and monstrously exploited proletariat in cities like Shanghai, Hangchow and Canton. Many Chinese workers had learned traditions of organization, during periods of temporary emigration in the West, and it was not long before an organized Chinese proletariat began to make its presence felt in national life. In May 1919 the political weight of the Chinese working class, was demonstrated for the first time (although in a confused manner) when the workers of Shanghai and elsewhere struck in support of nationalist students protesting against Japanese imperialism. In 1922 the seamen of Hong Kong staged a great strike which won major concessions from the British and was the first truly impressive manifestation of the Chinese working class struggling on its own terrain.

Throughout the 1920s the Chinese proletariat's attempt to organize itself was expressed by the formation of large industrial unions, while in 1921 the Chinese Communist Party was formed. Beginning as a small group of intellectuals with an extremely heterogeneous and confused concept of Marxism, it was able to rapidly expand its proletarian base thanks to the growth of working class struggle in the years after its formation. But both the unitary forms of organization (the unions) and the political organization (the Chinese Communist Party) that the Chinese working class equipped itself with were signs of the inevitable immaturity of this young proletariat. The new Chinese unions began as working class organizations even, though, on a global scale the epoch of trade union struggles was over for the proletariat and the existing trade unions had everywhere shown themselves to be pillars of the bourgeois order. And the Chinese unions were to prove themselves to be a fundamental obstacle to revolutionary struggle in the crucial years 1925-27. Similarly, the CCP never, overcame many of its initial confusions, especially on the question of nationalism. The dire consequence of this soon became apparent.

In the years following World War I, the convulsions of world capitalism shook China to the core. The intensification of inter-imperialist and local bourgeois rivalries, the outbreak of huge peasant revolts against the archaic land-holding system, and the emergence of a highly combative working class provided the background to the crucial period of the Chinese Revolution in 1925-27. But the ultimate fate of the Chinese Revolution was to be settled not in China alone, but on the world arena.

## **Russia: bastion of the counter-revolution**

The great revolutionary wave which had begun with the October Revolution in Russia went into a profound reflux after 1920 and was never to recover its initial impetus, despite desperate struggles in Germany in 1921 and 1923, Bulgaria in 1923, and China in 1925-27. This reflux had the most profound and tragic consequences for the original bastion of the revolution, Soviet Russia. Attempting to survive in a capitalist world, the Russian state, and the Bolshevik Party which had fused itself with it, was rapidly transformed into one of the main centres of the world counter-revolution. In Russia itself the needs of capital led to the crushing of working class resistance at Petrograd and Kronstadt in 1921, the persecution of dissident communist fractions, and the ferocious pursuit of capital accumulation at the expense of the working class. On the world arena, the same needs resulted in the growing subordination of the international revolution to the Russian state's search for alliances and economic aid in the outside world. As Rosa Luxemburg said, imperialism is the mode of survival of every national state in this epoch, and whatever the subjective intentions of the Bolsheviks, they were unable to resist the growing imperialist demands of the Russian state. As early as 1921, the Communist International's United Front policy in the West was in part an expression of the Russian state's overriding need for allies against the hostile imperialisms. But in 1922 Russia took a decisive

step towards integrating itself into the constellation of imperialisms with the signing of the secret Rapallo Treaty with Germany. Thus when the German workers took to the streets in 1923, they would discover that Soviet Russia was becoming one of the principal obstacles to the struggle against their own bourgeoisie. It was the same for the parties of the Communist International; once expressions of the revolutionary will of the proletariat, they were more and more becoming brakes on the development of the class struggle.

After 1924, the Stalinist faction consolidated its control in Russia and set about removing the last impediments to the unrestrained pursuit of the interests of Russian national capital. It was this factor which was to prove so pernicious for the subsequent evolution of the Chinese revolution. But even before 1924, the policies of the Bolsheviks in China had already sown the seeds of future defeats. In 1922 the Comintern's representative in China, H. Maring (alias Sneevliet) had, after friendly discussions with Sun Yat-sen, laid the groundwork for an alliance between the CCP and the Kuomintang. The intention was the formation of an 'anti-imperialist united front' to struggle 'for the national liberation of China, which in the first instance meant struggling against the war-lords who controlled large tracts of China, especially in the north. This alliance involved the militants of the CCP joining the Kuomintang as individuals while maintaining a nominal political autonomy as a party. In practice, it was to signify the almost total subordination of the CCP to the aims of the Kuomintang. At the 4th Congress of the CI in 1922 - the same Congress which endorsed the infamous policy of the 'Workers' United Front' in the West - Radek rudely dismissed the CCP's delegates' hesitations about the Kuomintang alliance: "Comrades you must understand that in China today neither socialism nor a soviet republic is on the agenda." In other words, China had to go through a 'bourgeois democratic phase' before the dictatorship of the proletariat could be put on the agenda. The Mensheviks had argued the same thing in regard to Russia in 1917.

Such was the CI's regression from the declarations of the 1st Congress, which had affirmed that only the world proletarian revolution could liberate the oppressed masses of the colonial regions. The subsequent policies of the Stalin-Bukharin dominated CI merely took this logic to its ultimate conclusions. The alliance between the CCP and the Kuomintang from 1922 onwards expressed Russia's attempt to ally itself with the Chinese bourgeoisie and so constitute a protective circle against those imperialist powers (Britain in particular) who were still displaying an intransigent hostility to the Soviet state. The Chinese proletariat was more and more regarded and used as a bargaining counter in Russia's dealings with the Chinese bourgeoisie. This inevitably meant that any attempt of the Chinese proletariat to struggle for its own interests could only be regarded as a threat to the alliance with the Kuomintang.

Under Stalin's auspices, the CI pursued this line without hesitation or doubts. But from 1923 onwards, guided by the adroit hands of Borodin, Russian arms and military advisers poured into China to give practical expression to the Soviet-Kuomintang-CCP alliance. In the CCP, one of the most fervent architects of the alliance with the Kuomintang was the young Mao Tse-tung.

## **The revolutionary struggle 1925-1927**

On May 30, 1925 workers and students demonstrated in Shanghai in solidarity with a strike in a Japanese-owned cotton mill. British-led municipal police fired on the demonstrators, killing twelve. The workers' response was immediate. Within a couple of weeks Shanghai, Canton, and Hong Kong were paralysed by a general strike. In Shanghai the strike was led by the CP-dominated General Labour Union. But in Canton and Hong Kong the organization of the strike was assumed by an embryonic soviet, the Strikers' Delegate Conference. Backed up by 250,000 strikers, who elected one delegate for every fifty workers, the Conference set up 2,000 pickets, ran hospitals and schools, took over the administration of justice and maintained a total boycott of all British goods.

The response of the imperialist powers was predictably hysterical, as the despised 'coolies' and 'Chinamen' rose to shake an angry fist in their faces. But this huge manifestation of the proletarian danger also had a significant effect on the so-called 'national bourgeoisie' organized in the Kuomintang. This party had always been an uneasy alliance of industrialists, militarists, students, petty bourgeois dreamers - in fact everyone except the most venal and submissive of the 'compradore' bourgeoisie and the war-lords. (Many of them later joined the Kuomintang when the tide was turned against them.) Initially under Sun Yat-sen's leadership the Kuomintang felt that it could make use of an alliance with the CCP, since the latter could mobilize the urban proletariat for the 'national revolution'. As long as the workers' struggles were directed at foreign-owned businesses and imperialist domination, the native bourgeoisie was prepared to support it. Indeed the 1925 strikes greatly advanced the Kuomintang's position in China. But when the strikes began to extend to Chinese enterprises, where working conditions were no less appalling than in the foreign owned sweat-shops, the 'national bourgeoisie' discovered that the workers were engaging in "foolish excesses", that it was "one thing to utilize the workers ... but quite another thing to let them bite off more than they can chew" (quoted from the *China Weekly Review*, March and April 1926, in H. Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, p.77). Very quickly the Chinese capitalists learned that they had much more in common with the 'foreign imperialists' than with 'their' workers.

As a result, the Kuomintang began to split into a right and left wing. The right represented the interests of the big bourgeoisie who wanted to end the workers' struggle, get rid of the Communists, and come to some kind of compromise with the established imperialisms. The left was led mainly by intellectuals and the lower ranks of the military, and wanted to retain the alliance with Russia and the CCP. The Comintern, Stalin in particular, laid great emphasis on this 'left' as a resolute opponent of imperialism, but events were to show that it was merely biding its time before moving against the working class. It was not accidental that the principal butcher of the Chinese proletariat, Chiang Kai-shek, originally put himself forward as a representative of the left. In fact Chiang, despite the fact that he always acted out of an insatiable personal ambition, symbolized the whole game of the Chinese bourgeoisie in that period. On the one hand he flattered the Soviet regime and made stirring speeches about the world revolution. On the other hand he was secretly entering into all kinds of deals with the forces of order. Like the new rulers of Russia, he was prepared to use the Chinese working class as a bludgeon against his immediate enemies, but all the while he was systematically preparing to suppress any "excesses" (i.e. any sign of autonomous working class struggle).

In March 1926, Chiang made his first major move against the proletariat. He staged a military coup in Canton which gave him almost unlimited control over the Kuomintang party apparatus. Communists and other working class militants were arrested, and the headquarters of the Canton-Hong Kong strike committee was raided. The strike had lasted for months, but was now quickly broken by the sudden-blows of Kuomintang repression. The response of the CI to this sudden shift in Chiang's position was silence, or rather a denial that any anti-working class repression had taken place. On the other hand, the Stalin-Bukharin leadership denounced anyone in the CI or CCP who began to get uneasy about the latest developments in the Kuomintang-CCP alliance.

Chiang had staged the coup as a preliminary to launching a major expedition against the northern war-lords. Although the Kremlin had originally been opposed to such an adventure at such a time, its emissaries were soon appeased by Chiang's gestures towards relaxing the repression against the workers and keeping up the pressure on the Kuomintang right wing.

The Northern Expedition was the fateful backcloth to the bloody events in Shanghai in 1927. Chiang's troops made spectacular progress against the northern militarists, largely thanks to the waves of workers' strikes and peasant revolts which helped disintegrate the northern forces from the rear. The proletariat and poor peasants were fighting against their dreadful living conditions under the illusion

that a Kuomintang victory would materially improve their lot. The Communist Party, far from struggling against these illusions, reinforced them to the hilt, not only by calling on the workers to fight for the victory of the Kuomintang, but also by restraining workers' strikes or peasant land seizures when they threatened to go too far. In the words of Borodin, the task of the Chinese Communists and the Chinese working class was to "do coolie service for the Kuomintang".

While the CCP and the CI were busy preventing the 'excesses' of the class struggle, Chiang set about crushing the very proletarian and peasant forces which had assisted his victories. Having forbidden all labour disputes for the duration of the northern campaign, Chiang suppressed the workers' movement in Canton, Kiangsi, and other towns in the line of his advance. In Kwangtung province the peasant movement against the landlords was violently smashed. The Shanghai tragedy was simply the culmination of this process.

## **The Shanghai insurrection**

Shanghai with its ports and industry contained the flower of the Chinese proletariat. It was under the control of the war-lords and the workers' bitter struggles against their local rulers was portrayed by the Kuomintang and the CCP as a prelude to the triumph of the 'national revolution'. As the Kuomintang army advanced towards the city, the CCP-led General Labour Union issued a call for a general strike to overthrow the city's ruling clique and so "support the Northern Expeditionary Army" and "hail Chiang Kai-shek". This initial attempt was brutally beaten back after fierce street-fighting. The city authorities unleashed a grim reign of terror against the working population, but its spirit remained unbroken. On March 21, the workers rose again, better organized this time, with a 5,000-strong workers' militia and between 500,000 and 800,000 workers actively taking part in the general strike and insurrection. Police stations and army garrisons were attacked and seized, and arms distributed to the workers' forces. By the next morning the whole city, except for the foreign concession, was in the hands of the proletariat.

An ominous transition period ensued. Chiang had arrived at the gates of Shanghai and, confronted with an armed working class uprising, immediately set about contacting the local capitalists, imperialists, and criminal gangs in order to prepare its suppression, just as he had done in all the other 'liberated' towns. And yet although Chiang's intentions were growing clear all the time, the CI and the CCP continued to advise the workers to trust in the national army and welcome Chiang as their liberator. By now Chiang's record of repression had alerted a vocal minority about the need for the working class to prepare to fight Chiang as well as the northern war-lords. In Russia Trotsky demanded the formation of workers', peasants', and soldiers' soviets as a basis for an armed struggle against Chiang and for the establishment of the proletarian dictatorship. In China a dissident group of CI representatives - Albrecht, Nassonov, and Fokkine - took up a similar position, criticizing the spinelessness of the CCP leadership. Within the CCP itself, pressure was growing for a break with the Kuomintang. But the party leadership remained faithful to the line of the CI - that any move against Chiang would play into the hands of the 'counter-revolution'. Instead of calling for the formation of soviets, the CCP organized a 'provisional municipal government' in which it sat as a minority alongside the local bourgeoisie. Instead of warning the workers about Chiang's intentions, the CCP welcomed his forces into the city. Instead of accentuating the class struggle, the only means of defence and offence available to the proletariat, the GLU opposed spontaneous strike actions and began to curb the power of the armed workers' pickets which had effective control of the streets. Thus Chiang was able to carefully prepare his counter-attack. On April 12th when he unleashed his mercenaries and criminal bands (many of whom were dressed as 'workers' of the newly formed 'moderate' unions, the Workers' Trade Alliance), the workers were caught off guard and were thoroughly confused. Despite vigorous resistance from the workers, Chiang quickly re-established 'order' in an orgy of bloodshed in which workers were decapitated in the streets or buried alive in

mass graves alongside their murdered comrades. The backbone of the Chinese working class had been broken.

Some time after this catastrophe, Stalin and his henchmen admitted that the revolution had suffered a 'set-back', but insisted that the line of the CCP and CI had been correct all along. The Shanghai defeat, they argued, had been 'unavoidable'. But now that Chiang and the whole Chinese bourgeoisie had finally 'gone over to the counter-revolution' they decided it was necessary for the workers to organize soviets and seize power for themselves. This new line took shape in the 'Canton Commune' of December 1927; a putsch organized by the CCP in the guise of a self-proclaimed 'soviet'. Although several thousand workers responded to the CCP's call to rise and set up the proletarian dictatorship, the majority of the class was already so demoralized by the betrayals of the CCP and the Kuomintang's repression that they stood aside from the uprising. It ended in another horrible bloodbath.

## **The death of the Communist International**

Stalin had certainly made a mistake in putting too much trust in Chiang and other Kuomintang elements (like the vaporous Wuhan 'leftists') as the best defenders of Russian interests in China. Having crushed the working class, Chiang soon gravitated back towards the orbit of the established imperialisms. But the politics of the Stalinists were not a mistake in the sense of the 'tactical errors' of a proletarian tendency. This was something that Trotsky and the Left Opposition could never understand. Stalinism represented the final triumph of the bourgeois counter-revolution in Russia and in the Communist International. The Stalinists' participation in the destruction of the Chinese workers' revolution was an expression of their class hostility to any manifestation of autonomous working class struggle. It was also the crowning moment in the final smashing of the world proletarian revolutionary wave of 1917-1923. By 1928 the Stalinists had won total mastery of the Russian party; even the Left Opposition had been expelled and the bureaucracy was ready to begin its programme of frenzied militarization and industrialization in preparation for the next world imperialist carnage. At the 4th Congress of the CI in 1928, the adoption of the theory of 'socialism in one country' gave the world formal notice of the death of the International and the passage of its parties into the camp of the bourgeoisie.

The events of 1927 also marked the death of the Chinese Communist Party as a proletarian organization. Since its formation it had been unable to resist the tide of degeneration in the CI and had allowed itself to be used as a passive instrument in the hands of the decomposing International. Its best elements were slaughtered in the defeats of 1927. Those who escaped the massacre went in two directions. A few like Ch'en Tu-hsiu, the leading figure in the party prior to 1927, began to question the whole policy of the CI, quit the party, and threw in their lot with the Left Opposition. But the rest, like Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai, remained loyal to the Stalinist counter-revolution, and having assisted in the decapitation of the revolutionary working class, were free to develop their new theory and practice about the 'leading role' of the peasants in the Chinese revolution. The defeats of 1927 paved the way for a new round of inter-imperialist warfare in China, just as the defeat of the class globally cleared the route to another world imperialist carnage. In all these conflicts the CCP showed itself to be a faithful servant of the national capital, mobilizing the masses for the war against Japan in the 1930s and the World War of 1939-1945. It thus earned its birthright to become the master of the capitalist state after 1949 and the foreman-in-chief of the Chinese working class.

As for the Chinese working class, it had in a sense paid the price of its own immaturity. The CCP's spineless policies were in part a reflection of the fact that the Chinese working class as a whole was unable to gain the experience needed to break out of the ideological stranglehold of the Kuomintang and of nationalism, assert itself as a class with its own unique mission, and provide itself with the unitary and political organs necessary to carry out that mission: soviets and a clear revolutionary

fraction. But in the last analysis the outcome of the Chinese Revolution was decided on the streets of Petrograd, Berlin, Budapest, and Turin. The failure of the world revolution left the Chinese workers isolated, confused, and constrained by the forces of counter-revolution which had grown up in their own midst. Thus their massive spontaneous struggles were able to be diverted onto a bourgeois terrain and ultimately crushed.

*This article is an edited version of [China 1927: Last gasp of the world revolution](#) by the International Communist Current. I (Steven Johns) have edited it to include the factual, historical information, but removed what I believe to be unhelpful references to [decadence theory](#), with which libcom.org disagrees and which detract from the positive elements of the article. I recognise this is a little unfair so do feel free to read the original on the above link.*