One hundred years since the May 4 movement in China—Part Two

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This is the final part of a two-part series. The first part was published on May 4.

With the end of World War I in November 1918, all eyes were on the Versailles Peace Conference, which would decide the terms of the peace with Germany. In the first year of the war, Japan had seized Shandong Province from Germany, which had held the area since 1898 on a 99-year lease. Japan’s representatives in Paris made clear that Tokyo not only wanted to retain Shandong indefinitely but to extend its presence, as outlined in the 21 Demands that had been accepted by the Beijing government in May 1915.

China had a seat at the table as one of the victorious allies. At least 140,000 Chinese labourers had supported the British and French war efforts, as part of the Chinese Labour Corps, with estimates of the number of deaths as high as 20,000.

On November 17, 1918, a huge demonstration in Beijing of some 60,000 people had celebrated the end of the war. The speeches reflected the widespread optimism that the Allies represented democracy over despotism and would restore Shandong to China. When the Versailles Peace conference opened in January 1919, however, those illusions were shattered. Japan announced that Britain, France and Italy had signed secret treaties with Japan that supported its claims to Shandong.

Great hopes remained, however, that the United States would prevail. In his speech to the US Congress on January 8, 1918, President Woodrow Wilson had outlined, in 14 points, the aims of the US in entering the war against Germany. The speech was, above all, aimed at countering the appeals of the Bolshevik leaders, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, to the international working class to put an end to the war through socialist revolution.

Wilson called for the abolition of secret treaties, an adjustment of colonial claims in the interests of the native peoples, as well as of the colonial powers, and, most significantly from the standpoint of China, a League of Nations that would guarantee the “political independence and territorial integrity of great and small states alike.”

The outcome of the Peace Conference in May 1919 came as a huge blow to Chinese intellectuals, students and the broader population. Their anger was not only directed against Japan and its immediate allies—Britain, France and Italy—and pro-Japanese ministers in the Beijing government, but also against the US and its president. A graduate at Peking University later recalled:

When the news of the Paris Peace Conference finally reached us, we were greatly shocked. We at once awoke to the fact that foreign nations were still selfish and militaristic and they were all great liars… We had nothing to do with our government, that we knew very well, and at the same time we could no longer depend on the principles of any so-called great leader like Woodrow Wilson, for example. Looking at our people and at the pitiful ignorant masses, we couldn’t help but feel we must struggle.[6]

The protests and strikes that began on May 4, 1919 were accompanied by a feverish intellectual and political debate over the way forward. It included a multitude of contenders—liberals and anarchists, democrats, syndicalists and socialists of different types. The American philosopher John Dewey arrived in China, literally on the eve of the May 4 protest, and developed a following, through his lectures and articles, over the next two years. The British philosopher Bertrand Russell also won followers after he was invited to lecture in China and remained for nearly a year from October 1920.

Marxism, however, had no strong established presence in China. It was identified with the Second International, which had been divided over the preoccupation of Chinese intellectuals—how to end colonial domination. At the International’s 1907 Stuttgart congress, which discussed the issue at length, some delegates openly expressed chauvinist attitudes, including toward the “yellow race.” The outbreak of World War I, an imperialist war for the division and revision of the world, precipitated the collapse of the Second International, as most parties and leaders sided with their own bourgeois governments and their predatory war aims.

Lenin and Trotsky, who had both opposed the betrayal of the Second International, expressed unambiguous opposition to colonialism and support for the struggles of the oppressed peoples of the colonies. In the wake of the October 1917 Russian Revolution, that message reverberated around the world. The manifesto of the founding congress of the Third International in March 1919 declared: “Colonial slaves of Africa and Asia: the hour of proletarian dictatorship will also be the hour of your liberation.”

In one of his first actions as People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs, Trotsky seized and published the secret treaties and papers of the Tsarist and Provisional governments, in order to expose the intrigues of the major powers. In July 1919, Leo Karakhan, acting for the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, issued a declaration abrogating all previous secret and unequal treaties between the Tsarist regime and China, and relinquishing Russian claims in China, without seeking compensation.

When news of that declaration finally reached China in March 1920, it had a profound impact. It stood in stark contrast to the determination of the imperialist powers to maintain their colonial possessions and enclaves in China. Some 30 major organisations publicly expressed their gratitude to the Soviet government. Most newspapers demanded that the Beijing government, which had continued to recognise the Tsarist officials of the Russian legation, establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet government.

One of the first Chinese intellectuals to recognise the significance of the Russian Revolution was Chen Duxiu’s close collaborator, Li Dazhao. In an essay published in New Youth in 1918, entitled “The Victory of
Bolshevism,” he hailed the October Revolution as the beginning of a new era:

Although the word Bolshevism was created by the Russians, its spirit expresses the common sentiments of 20th century mankind. Thus, the victory of Bolshevism is the victory of the spirit of all mankind. [7]

Inspired by Trotsky’s work, War and the International, Li declared that World War I marked the beginning of “the class war… between the world proletarian masses and the world capitalists.” The Bolshevik revolution was only the first step toward “the destruction of the presently existing national boundaries which are barriers to socialism and the destruction of the capitalist monopoly-profit system of production.” [8]

Societies for the Study of Socialism had proliferated following the protest movement of May–June 1919. However, in March 1919, inspired by Li, students from Peking University established a Society for the Study of Marxist Theory. Early in 1920, the Third International or Comintern, which had closely followed the events of 1919 in China, sent Gregori Voitinsky from the Far Eastern Secretariat to Beijing to make contacts. He met with Li, who sent him to meet Chen in Shanghai.

Chen, who had been influenced by the philosophical pragmatism and democratic idealism of Dewey, was slower to embrace Marxism than Li. However, in the wake of the May–June protest movement, his political attitudes shifted rapidly. He had been arrested for his activities during the protests, and following his release, later in 1919, left for Shanghai, where he found layers of workers and youth who had been radicalised. By one account:

When Chen returned there, he immediately attracted a group of active intellectuals who joined him in Marxist study and activities… Chen himself became active in promoting the labour movement, often making fiery speeches to the workers that reflected his Marxist thinking. [9]

When Voitinsky met with Chen in Shanghai the result was a decision to amalgamate a number of groups, which would form the basis for the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, initially created in secret in May 1920. A draft party constitution was passed and a provisional central organisation based in Shanghai. Chen was elected as its first secretary. The party was formally established in July 1921, which is usually taken as the official date. [10]

**The Chinese Communist Party today**

A hundred years on, the Chinese Communist Party completely distorts the significance of the May 4, 1919 events. It has long repudiated the democratic principles of the New Culture movement and the socialist internationalism upon which the party was founded. The last thing that the CCP bureaucrats in Beijing want is for young workers and students today to draw inspiration from the youthful rebellion of 1919 by mounting their own revolt against the CCP’s police-state apparatus and the stultifying intellectual climate it engenders.

Chinese President Xi Jinping used his speech this week to mark the May 4 movement to hail the virtues of nationalism and patriotism. Xi, who rests on a vast repressive apparatus, insisted that young people must avoid “mistaken thoughts” and “obey the party.”

Significantly, students from Peking University and other elite institutions have been detained since last year for the “crime” of assisting workers from Jasic Technology, in Shenzhen, in their struggle to form an independent trade union. The Marxist Society on the campus was threatened with closure, then taken over by CCP stooges. And this took place at the university that was at the very centre of the intellectual ferment of the New Culture movement, and whose students initiated the protest of May 4, 1919.

The CCP cannot tolerate the study of genuine Marxism because it raises far too many questions about its own history and practices. Its “socialism with Chinese characteristics” is an absurd formula, used to justify the processes of capitalist restoration, over which it has presided since 1978. The result has led to staggering disparities between the wealth and privileges of the CCP leaders and the super-rich oligarchs they represent, and the vast majority of working people. Incapable of making any appeal based on socialist principles, the regime has relied on whipping up Chinese nationalism and resurrecting backward Chinese traditions and superstitions.

This is epitomised by the CCP’s revival of Confucianism—the chief target of the New Culture movement. It is promoted in schools, universities and through the fostering of Confucius Institutes in countries around the world. In a speech to an international conference in 2014, marking the 2,565th anniversary of the birth of Confucius, President Xi declared that “the Chinese Communist Party is the successor to and promoter of fine traditional Chinese culture.” Undoubtedly, the rigid hierarchical view of society to be found in Confucianism dovetails with the bureaucratic outlook of the CCP apparatus.

The CCP long ago abandoned the socialist and internationalist principles embodied in Marxism and in the October 1917 Russian Revolution. The CCP bureaucrats today are not heirs of that tradition, but of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow that usurped power from the working class under the reactionary nationalist banner of “Socialism in One Country.” Shortly after the CCP’s foundation, Stalin shackled it to the bourgeois Kuomintang (KMT), leading to a disastrous series of defeats of the Chinese working class in the revolutionary upheavals of 1925–27.

Once again, the figure of Chen Duxiu looms large. He opposed the betrayal of the Chinese revolution in the 1920s, and sided with Leon Trotsky, who had warned that Stalin’s policies in China would lead to a catastrophe for the working class. Chen became the first chairman of the unified Chinese Left Opposition. Formed in 1931, it waged a courageous struggle for the founding principles of the CCP, despite being hounded and persecuted on all sides, including by the Stalinists.

In China, as internationally, the first stirrings of the working class are emerging in opposition to the oppressive conditions of work and life, and to the CCP’s police-state apparatus, which seeks to suppress any form of opposition and independent thought. As in 1919, the main question that confronts Chinese workers and youth is on what basis a political fight can be waged against the CCP and the oligarchs that it represents.

The chief lesson from the May 4 movement is that the answers to these questions are not to be found in China—in particular, in reviving the Chinese variant of Stalinism represented by Mao Zedong. In 1969, on the 50th anniversary of the May 4 events, Mao exploited and perverted the memories of that movement to justify the unleashing of gangs of Red Guards against the so-called capitalist roaders in the misnamed Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

In fact, Mao proved to be the capitalist raider in chief. No sooner had he set the Red Guards against his factional opponents, than the working class appeared on the scene, with the establishment of the Shanghai People’s Commune in 1967. Mao’s response was to call out the army to bring the situation under control. By 1969, the disoriented youth in the Red Guards had become simply pawns in the factional struggles in Beijing.

The “Cultural Revolution,” however, could not and did not resolve the underlying economic and strategic crisis produced by the reactionary nationalist perspective of “socialism in one country.” There was no
national solution: the only choices were world socialist revolution or reintegration in world capitalism. Having abandoned the former decades before, Mao reached a rapprochement with US imperialism in 1972 that opened the door for wholesale capitalist restoration.

Today, workers and youth in China confront the social catastrophe created by capitalist restoration, and the danger of war with the US, for which the CCP has no answer, other than an arms race that will inevitably end in catastrophe. As in 1919, the way out, again, is to be found on the international political and theoretical plane.

What is necessary is a return to the strategy of world socialist revolution and to build a Chinese section of the international party that fights for it—the world Trotskyist movement, today represented by the International Committee of the Fourth International. It alone embodies the necessary political lessons of the strategic experiences of the 20th century in the fight against Stalinism, including the courageous struggles of Chen Duxiu and the Chinese Trotskyists.

Concluded


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