

Introduction to the 1951 report to the Fourth International by Chinese Trotskyist Peng Shuzhi

By Peter Symonds
3 October 2019

The following report analysing the 1949 Chinese Revolution was delivered by the veteran Chinese Trotskyist Peng Shuzhi to the Third Congress of the Fourth International in November 1951. The *World Socialist Web Site* is republishing the report as it provides important insights into the character of the 1949 Chinese Revolution and the political and theoretical issues that it raised for the Fourth International.

The collapse of the Kuomintang dictatorship of Chiang Kai-shek and the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) posed a number of important questions that required careful examination and consideration. How was it that a Stalinist Party based on the bankrupt two-stage theory of revolution and at the head of peasant armies had been able to seize power? What was the class character of the new regime? Most importantly, what perspective would the Fourth International and the Chinese Trotskyists fight for in the working class?

At its Third Congress, the Fourth International was no longer a politically homogeneous world party. An opportunist tendency had emerged headed by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, which, under the pressure of the post-war restabilisation of capitalism, adapted to the dominant bureaucratic leaderships in the working class—Social Democratic, bourgeois nationalist, and in particular Stalinist.

After a careful examination of the evolution of the so-called buffer states of Eastern Europe, the Fourth International had designated them as deformed workers' states. With the onset of the Cold War and the initiation of Marshall Plan in 1948, Stalin and the Soviet bureaucracy reacted by nationalising private enterprises and instituting bureaucratic economic planning throughout Eastern Europe. The emphasis, however, had to be placed on the term "deformed." These "workers states," in which the working class had no political say and whose struggles were ruthlessly suppressed, were deformed from birth.

As in the case of the Soviet Union, a degenerated workers' state, these regimes were transitional between capitalism and socialism. Either the working class, as advocated by the Fourth International, would carry out a political revolution to oust the Stalinist bureaucracies as part of the struggle for socialism internationally, or, if they remained in power, the Stalinists would seek to consolidate their privileges through the restoration of capitalism.

Pablo and Mandel transformed this provisional designation into its opposite. According to Pablo, Stalinism was no longer a counter-revolutionary cancer in the workers' movement, as Leon Trotsky had explained, but under mass pressure could project a revolutionary orientation. He envisaged that the transition from capitalism to socialism would involve "centuries of deformed workers' states." In this scenario, the Fourth International was reduced to the role of critics and advisers to the Stalinist bureaucracies as they supposedly underwent self-reform. Pablo regarded the Chinese Revolution as further proof of his revisionist

thesis.

In his report to the Third Congress, Peng carefully explained the exceptional circumstances that had enabled the CCP to take power. These included the inner rot and corruption of the tottering Kuomintang regime, its abandonment by American imperialism as a hopeless cause, the CCP's ability to falsely claim via the Soviet Stalinists the prestige of the October Revolution, and the military aid that Mao's peasant armies received from the Soviet Union.

Peng took issue in his report with Mandel [Germain] who claimed that the CCP's military victory was the result of "mass pressure" and in violation of Stalin's directives.

In the aftermath of World War II, Stalin betrayed the upsurge of the working class insisting that the Communist parties form coalition governments with discredited capitalist parties and thus propped up tottering bourgeois rule. In France and Italy, the Stalinists physically disarmed the working class and blocked any struggle for socialism.

The CCP followed instructions from Moscow to the letter. Peng explained that for two years Mao had sought to form a coalition government with Chiang Kai-shek and refused to call for his overthrow, even after the nationalist armies seized the CCP's stronghold in Yenan and issued an arrest warrant for Mao.

Far from responding to "mass pressure," the CCP held back strikes by workers, student protests and rural unrest. This greatly endangered the revolutionary movement by allowing Chiang time to consolidate his forces and control of the cities. When Mao finally called for Chiang's overthrow in October 1947, it was not at odds with Stalin, but rather was in line with the latter's response to Washington's aggressive Cold War policies.

Peng drew a distinction between the situation in China and that in Yugoslavia where the Communist Party under Josip Tito was compelled by the demands of the partisan war against the German army and its collaborators to exceed the limits dictated by Stalin. A coalition government with a section of the bourgeoisie in 1944 supported by Stalin and his imperialist allies rapidly fell apart. The Communist Party took power and over the next three years nationalised key sections of industry. An open breach erupted in 1948 between Tito and Stalin.

By contrast, Mao toed the line from Moscow, including siding with Stalin against Tito. Under his program of "New Democracy," Mao explicitly defended the property and profits of Chinese and foreign investors, with the exception of those "bureaucratic capitalists" who had fled to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-shek. His government specifically included representatives of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. It was only the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 that forced the CCP to broaden its nationalisation of capitalist property with the first five-year economic plan along bureaucratic Soviet-style lines announced in 1953.

The full expropriation of the Chinese capitalist class was only completed by 1956.

The analysis developed by Peng cut across the adulation of the Maoist regime by Pablo and Mandel. At the 11th Plenum of the International Executive Committee (IEC) of the Fourth International in May 1952, Mandel delivered a report that was directed at undermining Peng and branding him as a sectarian. Ignoring the CCP's opportunist zig-zag in policies, Mandel emphasised the regime's "left turns" as if they foreshadowed the inevitable march towards genuine socialism.

"The Chinese CP," Mandel declared, "has begun, in an opportunist and empirical manner, it is true, but has begun in reality to apply the theory of permanent revolution in its own manner." Leon Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution explained that in countries of belated capitalist development like China, only the working class, not the bourgeoisie, was capable of carrying out the tasks performed by the classic bourgeois revolutions in Europe and America, and in doing so would be compelled to implement socialist policies as part of the fight for socialism internationally.

Mao's "New Democracy," however, was a revival of the discredited Menshevik two-stage theory that subordinated the working class to the capitalist class in the first bourgeois stage of the revolution, while relegating the fight for socialism to the distant future. The Maoist regime for its own survival was compelled by the Korean War and the American blockade of China to take steps that were completely at odds with its own two-stage theory. However, that did not signify in any sense that Mao had embraced Trotsky's perspective of permanent revolution, as became evident in the subsequent twists and turns in its policies that ultimately, using the two-stage theory as justification, ended in capitalist restoration.

Mandel declared that Peng was engendering pessimism and skepticism by closing his eyes "to reality as it is, by obstinately continuing to condemn CP policy for past crimes, which it is no longer committing today." Mandel's absurd claim that the CCP had now taken up Trotsky's ideas, albeit in "an opportunist and empirical fashion," took place as the Maoists intensified their persecution of Chinese Trotskyists. While acknowledging the CP's virulent anti-Trotskyism, Mandel also blamed his own comrades in China for failing to effect "the necessary turn in time" towards their persecutors.

In November 1953, James P. Cannon, leader of the American Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP), launched the international struggle against Pabloism with the release of an "Open Letter" calling on the sections of the Fourth International to reassert the basic principles of orthodox Trotskyism.

In opposition to Pablo's shameless adaptation to the Stalinist regimes in Europe and Asia, Cannon insisted that the chief obstacle to socialist revolution was Stalinism, "which attracts workers through exploiting the prestige of the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, only later, as it betrays their confidence, to hurl them back into the arms of the Social Democracy, into apathy, or back into illusions in capitalism."

It is necessary, Cannon wrote, to "know how to fight imperialism and all its petty-bourgeois agencies (such as nationalist formations or trade-union bureaucracies) without capitulation to Stalinism; and, conversely, know how to fight Stalinism (which in the final analysis is a petty-bourgeois agency of imperialism) without capitulating to imperialism."

The "Open Letter" detailed the Pabloite betrayal of the French General Strike in August 1953, and Pablo's cover-up for Stalin's mobilisation of Soviet troops to suppress the East German uprising of workers in June 1953. Cannon also condemned Pablo's attitude to Chinese Trotskyists whom he dismissed as "refugees from a revolution." Cannon explained "Pablo's line of conciliationism toward Stalinism leads him inexorably to touch up the Mao regime *couleur de rose* while putting grey tints on the firm, principled stand of our Chinese comrades."

Peng and the Chinese Trotskyists sided with the SWP against Pablo and Mandel and in the formation of the International Committee of the Fourth International. In a letter to Cannon, Peng explained in detail Pablo's abuse of the Chinese Trotskyists and his gross adaptation to Maoism. In nation-wide dragnets on December 22, 1952 and January 8, 1953, the CCP carried out the wholesale arrest and imprisonment of more than 1,000 Chinese Trotskyists, their family members and supporters. Pablo delayed for months the publication of Peng's open letter to the Chinese Communist Party condemning the mass arrests.

Peng Shuzhi had a long history in the Communist movement going back to the founding of the Chinese Communist Party which he joined in 1920. He was among the first group of young party members to be sent to the Soviet Union to study at the Communist University of Toilers of the East. He returned to China in 1924 and was elected to the Central Committee and its top leadership body, the Central Standing Committee, in early 1925. He opposed the subordination of the Communist Party to the Kuomintang which produced one disaster after another in 1927. Convinced by the Trotsky's analysis of Stalin's betrayal, Peng joined the Left Opposition in China and was expelled from the CCP.

The Chinese Trotskyists were persecuted on all sides, by Chiang Kai-shek, by the imperialist powers and by the CCP. Peng, along with nine other Trotskyists, was arrested in October 1932 by Kuomintang police and spent five years in Nanking Model Prison. After World War II, as a top Trotskyist leader, he was hunted by British police in Hong Kong and forced to flee, first to Vietnam, then to Europe, where he actively participated in the leadership of the Fourth International.

His further political evolution and that of the SWP will be detailed in the introduction to the second document that will be republished on the *World Socialist Web Site*: The Socialist Workers Party's resolution in 1955 on the 1949 Chinese Revolution.

Read Peng's report: The Causes of the Victory of the Chinese Communist Party over Chiang Kai-Shek, and the CCP's Perspectives

IYSSE lecture series in Australia

Seventy years after the Chinese Revolution: How the struggle for socialism was betrayed

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>