

Introduction to the 1955 SWP resolution “The Third Chinese Revolution and its Aftermath”

By Peter Symonds
9 October 2019

The *World Socialist Web Site* today is republishing the 1955 resolution entitled “The Third Chinese Revolution and its Aftermath” adopted by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), at that time the Trotskyist party in the United States. The resolution summed up the lengthy discussion within the SWP and world Trotskyist movement of the significance of 1949 Chinese Revolution and the impact of its deformation under the Stalinist leadership of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The Trotskyist movement recognised the far-reaching significance of the Chinese Revolution, which ended more than a century of the semi-colonial subjugation of China, unified the country and dealt a huge blow to US imperialism. The United States had fought the 1941–45 war with Japan for the domination of Asia, and China in particular. The 1949 revolution also ended the domination of the landlords and usurers in the countryside, lifted the living standards of the population and eliminated much that was socially and culturally backward.

However, the CCP was based on the reactionary Stalinist perspective of “Socialism in One Country” and its corollary, the two-stage theory, which subordinated the working class to the so-called progressive wing of the capitalist class in the first democratic stage of the revolution, and relegated any fight for socialism to a second, distant stage. The two-stage theory had already produced a disaster for the working class in the revolutionary upheavals of 1925–27, during which Stalin insisted that the CCP support the Kuomintang (KMT), the party of the Chinese bourgeoisie. In April 1927, KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek turned on the CCP, murdering thousands of workers and Communists in Shanghai. A month later, the “left” KMT carried out a similar slaughter.

Leon Trotsky had called for the political independence of the CCP from the KMT and warned of the impending disaster. His Theory of Permanent Revolution, which had guided the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the establishment of the first workers state, demonstrated that the bourgeoisie was incapable of playing a progressive, revolutionary role and that it fell to the working class to carry out the tasks of the democratic revolution. In doing so, the proletariat would be compelled to carry out socialist tasks as part of the struggle for socialism internationally.

In the aftermath of World War II, the CCP, under instructions from Moscow, sought to form a coalition government with Chiang Kai-shek and, in doing so, held back and endangered the post-war upsurge of the working class and rural masses in China. The speed with which Chiang’s bankrupt, corrupt and hated KMT regime collapsed, after Mao finally called for its overthrow in October 1947, demonstrated that it could have been brought down far sooner.

As the SWP resolution explained: “The Stalinist deformation of the revolution rendered its development more costly, convulsive and protracted. The armies and regime of Chiang could have been knocked down like rotten pieces of wood had the CCP at any time summoned the masses in the cities to rise.”

The resolution pointed out that, on its seizure of power, the CCP did not implement socialist policies, but integrated various bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties into the government and protected the private property and profits of those capitalists who had not fled with Chiang to Taiwan. It was only with the onset of the Korean War of 1950–53 that the CCP regime, faced with a US blockade and internal sabotage by the bourgeoisie, was compelled to nationalise private enterprises and institute bureaucratic economic planning along Soviet Stalinist lines.

The SWP resolution was published in the aftermath of the 1953 split in the Fourth International and the formation of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to fight a revisionist tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. Adapting to the post-war restabilisation of capitalism and the continued domination of the working class by bureaucratic apparatuses, in particular Stalinism, Pablo and Mandel wrote off any politically independent role for the working class and the Fourth International. In particular, the Pabloites painted the Maoist regime in rosy colours and denigrated the role of Chinese Trotskyists.

SWP leader James Cannon issued an Open Letter to the world movement in 1953 defending the principles of orthodox Trotskyism, and the necessity of politically fighting Stalinism in all its forms, including Maoism, without adapting to imperialism, and vice-versa. Cannon opposed Pablo’s transformation of the Fourth International’s provisional characterisation of the buffer states of Eastern Europe as “deformed workers states” into a perspective lasting “generations” that ascribed a historically progressive role to the Stalinist bureaucracies.

The 1955 SWP resolution concluded: “The objective dynamics, the inner logic of the struggle against imperialist intervention forced the bureaucracy to break with capitalism, nationalize the decisive means of production, impose the monopoly of foreign trade, institute planning, and in this way clear the road for the introduction of production relations and institutions that constitute the foundations of a workers state, which China is today, even though a Stalinist caricature thereof. China is a deformed workers state because of the Stalinist deformation of the Third Chinese Revolution.”

In a speech at the 1955 SWP national convention that adopted the resolution, Cannon emphasised that the CCP had been compelled to carry out measures that were in complete opposition to its own

two-stage program, which it never abandoned, however.

“The bourgeois regime in China fell almost of its own weight, and not even the Stalinists could prevent it. They had no idea of introducing a new social order. But they found themselves obliged to expropriate the Chinese capitalists despite their announced program and promise and hope to support a program of progressive capitalism...

“To a large and decisive extent, I believe, the theory of permanent revolution, as a theory of development, has been vindicated in the steps which the Stalinists in China have been compelled to take... And acknowledging the full fact that China today, after six years of the rule of Mao Tse-tung, is from the point of view of economic structure, a vastly different country than it was six years ago—I don’t give Stalinism any credit for that whatsoever.

“I give credit for that to the logic of the situation, the international contradictions, the weakness of the Chinese bourgeoisie; and to be patriotic, I give a great deal of credit to our own boy from Independence, Missouri, Harry Truman. By his blockade of the New China, and his policy in the Korean War, Truman forced the Chinese Stalinists to take the road of socialisation as a matter of survival.”

In characterising China as a deformed workers state, the emphasis had to be placed on “deformed”—that is, it was a state dominated by a Stalinist party, in which the working class had no political voice. Without a political revolution by the working class to overthrow the Stalinist apparatuses, as part of the revolutionary struggle for socialism internationally, these regimes would ultimately restore capitalism.

As the resolution explained, the accumulating contradictions of the unstable transitional regime could lead either to capitalism or socialism. “On the road to capitalism, the counterrevolution would have to break the resistance of the awakening and growing Chinese proletariat. On the road to socialism, the workers would have to abolish the bureaucracy along with the Mao leadership that now heads it.”

The opportunism of Pablo and Mandel was not simply the product of individual weaknesses but reflected intense political pressures on the Trotskyist movement by the continued domination of the working class by the old bureaucratic apparatuses, including Stalinism. While the SWP had defended orthodox Trotskyism in 1953, it began to succumb to the same pressures.

David North, chairman of the Trotskyist Socialist Equality Party in the US, details the degeneration of the SWP in his book *The Heritage We Defend*. He identifies as a key turning point the crisis of Stalinism in 1956 triggered by Khrushchev’s secret speech denouncing Stalin, followed by the Hungarian Revolution. The next year, amid the upheaval and mass exodus from the Communist Party in the US, the SWP reacted, not by aggressively seeking to clarify the issues of Stalinism, but by adopting a policy of regroupment that blunted the Trotskyist critique in pursuit of alliances with elements of the radical petty-bourgeois milieu, including ex-CP members.

At the same time, the SWP responded favourably to a letter from Leslie Goonewardene, a leader of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in Sri Lanka, for unity talks with the Pabloite International Secretariat. The LSSP had already played a politically dubious role in the aftermath of the 1953 split in the Fourth International by suggesting parity talks between the ICFI and the Pabloites. Chinese Trotskyist Peng Shuzhi had been one of the early champions of such negotiations, which the SWP had rejected (see: Introduction to Peng’s 1951 report) The SWP’s favourable response in 1957 suggested that

the party leadership no longer regarded the fundamental differences of principle revealed in the split as unbridgeable.

It was the British Trotskyists of the Socialist Labour League (SLL) who opposed the dangerous rightward lurch by the SWP. As David North explained:

“The contrast between the orientation of the British Trotskyists and that of the SWP was most closely defined in their very different response to the crisis within the Stalinist movement.

“While the SWP’s regroupment policy led quickly, in practice, to an abandonment of its independent Trotskyist identity in order to win friends among the broad petty-bourgeois milieu of ex-Stalinist and semi-Stalinists, the British Trotskyists launched a powerful offensive for the ideas of the Fourth International. While seeking the broadest discussion among all those forces, workers and intellectuals, affected by the Stalinist crisis, Healy’s organisation did not make unprincipled compromises in order to make itself acceptable. Thus, while the SWP came to view the struggle against Pabloism as an embarrassment and millstone around its neck, the British saw it as the theoretical spearhead of its offensive against Stalinism.” (*The Heritage We Defend*, Detroit: Labor Publications, p.341)

While the SWP abandoned its regroupment policy and any talks with the Pabloites at that stage, it provided no explanation and did not probe the political roots of its opportunist manoeuvres. As a result, the same issues were to rapidly re-emerge in an even more virulent form following the Cuban Revolution in early 1959. In marked contrast to the careful and protracted discussion that had taken place over the Chinese Revolution, the SWP very quickly concluded, based on the most superficial analysis of events in Cuba, that the new regime established by the bourgeois nationalist Fidel Castro and his small group of followers constituted a genuine workers state, overturning the fundamental principles of Trotskyism, including the Theory of Permanent Revolution.

The SWP’s uncritical adulation of Castro and Che Guevara was its entrée card into reunification talks with the Pabloites without any discussion, let alone principled resolution, of the political differences that had led to the 1953 split. The SLL in Britain led the political struggle of the ICFI against the SWP’s unprincipled reunification in 1963 and, in doing so, defended the political program and heritage of orthodox Trotskyism.

Regardless of the SWP’s later political degeneration, its 1955 resolution on the 1949 Chinese Revolution remains an important summation of the discussion within the International Committee of the Fourth International and the conclusions reached on the character of the Maoist regime established in China.

Read the 1955 SWP resolution: *The Third Chinese Revolution and its Aftermath*

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>