



Murdered Communists 1927

# The working class in the second Chinese revolution

Elizabeth Millward tells the story of the last time the working class took the lead

Before 1989 the Chinese workers' movement had been crushed for 60 years. But in the 1920s it fought heroic battles, rich in lessons for today.

Our feature on those class battles opens with Elizabeth Millward's account of how a working class developed in China, how its struggles interlaced with those of the nationalist bourgeoisie, and why it was defeated.

The article that follows, from Wang Fan-hsi, a veteran of Chinese communism and Trotskyism, reviews the debate in the communist movement on strategy and tactics in that period. As a short preface to Wang's survey, we also publish a brief account by Wang himself of his life and political activity in the 1920s.

The names Chen Tu-hsiu and Kuomintang are spelled in the

modern manner, Chen Duxiu and Guomindang, in Wang's article.

**The history of the second Chinese revolution must begin with an account of what China was like at the turn of the 20th century, after 2000 years as an almost closed empire.**

At the beginning of the 20th century, China bore little relationship economically or politically to the countries of the West. The vast majority of the population were peasants — by the 1920s over 90% of the population still lived outside towns and only 6% lived in cities of over 50,000. The urban proletariat was tiny, largely concentrated in Shanghai, where 300,000 workers made up perhaps 20% of the workforce, although the proletariat in all of China formed only 0.5% of the population. Other concentrations of workers included 200,000 in Canton and Hong Kong, and 100,000 in and around Wuhan. About half the proletariat (44%) worked for foreign-controlled enterprises.

Until 1912 the country was governed by an Emperor, and a network of civil servants. In addition, with the exception of the new foreign industries, produc-

tion and distribution was highly centralised, with vast public works (notably irrigation for agriculture) and food distribution in times of shortage. Peasants produced handicrafts with few industrially manufactured goods. Foreign intervention disrupted the balance of this economy by introducing cheap manufactured goods and upsetting central organisation.

Industry was largely foreign-owned and run from 'concessions' policed by foreign powers in the big cities and seaports. China was being forced to trade at the point of a gun. Foreign-imposed tariff laws did not permit China to build its own industrial base.

China became chaotic and divided, the vital public works fell into further disrepair, and local warlords ruthlessly exploited the peasantry who had now no form of redress. Sun Yat-sen ruled in South China, and various warlords (Tchuns) in the north, with key cities (like Shanghai) under almost total foreign control.

China's enforced entry into World War I was on the orders of the allies, who wanted an excuse to seize German concessions and shipping in China. The attempt by the allies to hand these concessions over to Japan at the end of

the war — to whom they were 'given' by the great powers who signed the Versailles Treaty — sparked huge protests in 1919 — the so-called May 4th movement. **Chen Tu-hsiu**, a professor at Peking university, initiated a demonstration in Peking of 5,000 students. This spread to include over 100,000 people in 16 provinces. As a result, the Chinese government refused to sign the Versailles Treaty. The May 4th movement showed that nationalism was not just the prerogative of foreign-educated intellectuals like Chen and Sun, but had a real grip on the minds of ordinary people.

In addition to anti-imperialism, the intellectuals hated the warlords' militarism. The warlords were financially tied to foreign powers and also used the foreign-policed concessions as a place of retreat from the fighting on their home ground.

The imperialist powers had created a chaotic and divided China, and wanted to retain it in that condition. Different imperialists supported different warlords, using them to attack Sun Yat-sen. Sun appealed to America for help with his programme of democratic construction, but America, like the other powers, was interested in China mainly as a market. A united China, especially one united under Sun's anti-imperialist, anti-militarist programme would lead to the expulsion of the foreign powers, and maybe the reclaiming of the territories seized by those powers (eg. Hong Kong).

Western-style democracy under Sun Yat-sen failed under these conditions and he abandoned it even as an idea, re-organising his nationalist forces for a period of 'tutelage' (in reality dictatorship) with the help of the only country who would answer his appeal — Russia. Far from wanting to extend Russia's exploitation of China, Lenin's government had pledged to return the territories occupied by the Tsars. Even though Sun Yat-sen did not favour communism for China, he agreed to negotiations with the Soviets.

## The bourgeois nationalists

Out of the chaos of China's economic, political and social situation flowed a desire for change. The opposition movements were to divide into two main currents, both developed with the help of Russia and the Communist International. These currents were nationalism and communism. The nationalists, initially led by Sun Yat-sen and later Chiang Kai Shek, wanted to re-unify the country, to end the domination of the imperialist powers and to bring Western political structures to China.

By the late 1920s these ideas had simply deteriorated into the desire to unify China militarily, and democracy which had been tried very briefly had fallen victim to corruption and been abandoned.

The opium trade (forced on China by Britain in the 19th century), had drained the country of its wealth (silver), and China was forced to borrow heavily from the west to finance further trade it

did not want.

The lives of the peasant majority were not easy; a 1927 survey showing that more than half of all Chinese peasants were either partial or full tenants paying up to half or more of their produce as rent, or were agricultural labourers receiving irregular or minimal pay. Despite this, the landlords were subject to governmental control. Periodic peasant uprisings, which led to government investigations, prevented the worst excesses of the landlords, and centralised food distribution prevented the worst of the periodic famines.

No-one was allowed to prevent the exploitation and degradation of Chinese labour in the foreign-owned factories, and the profits from those industries went out of China, bringing no benefits to the Chinese. Between 1851 and 1855, the excess of imports over exports from China was over £175 million, and China was forced to borrow money to buy European iron and steel. In 1894 Japan tried to annex part of China but was stopped by Russia, France and Britain. Yet Japan was 'given' a treaty port and 'indemnities' of £34.5 million — China was then lent £48 million by British and European banks to pay this! The money had to be paid back out of taxes generated by the peasants, putting them under a huge burden.

For the Western ports, China was a market, its Manchu Emperors to be propped up or not, depending on the benefits to Western capitalism. Its economy (oriental despotism), previously balanced, if primitive, was in tatters, and its people exploited as cheap labour and taxpayers for European loans. Yet it was this exploitation, and the concentration of the workers in industry which was to sow the seeds of the coming revolution.

## 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."

Finally, the theses deal with the ideas of permanent revolution. This is the question not just of whether the revolution must pass through a stable capitalist 'stage', but of the leadership of the revolutionary movements. "The real strength of the liberation movement in the colonies is no longer confined to the narrow circle of the bourgeois democratic nationalists. In most of the colonies there already exist organised revolutionary parties which strive to be in close relation with the working masses. The relation of the CI with the revolutionary movement in the colonies should be realised through the medium of these parties or groups, because they are the vanguard of the working class in their respective countries. They are not very large today, but they reflect the aspirations of the masses and the latter will follow them to the revolution. The Communist Parties of the different imperialist countries must work in conjunction with these proletarian parties of the colonies and give moral and material support to the revolutionary movements in general.

"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 petty-bourgeoisie

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 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.

At the time that the CCP was building itself into the sort of party which could lead important political and labour movements it was receiving financial support from Russia and the Comintern. The CI had an active role in the development of the new party, through representatives like Voitinsky, and later Maring and Joffe, who spent time in China. In addition, Chinese communists visited Russia. The Russians who had made the October Revolution were committed internationalists, who submitted their decisions to the CI, and politically believed that the revolution in Russia could only be safeguarded and lead to socialism if it was spread to the West — and to countries like China.

But they could not afford to stake the short-term security of the new workers' state on immediate revolution in other countries. They knew that capitalism did not want to see the workers' state succeed, and consequently isolated Russia as much as possible. The imperialist wrangling over China could mean nothing good for Russian security. If China was to be subjugated completely by the imperialist powers forming a bloc and further dividing the country amongst themselves, then Russia would be completely surrounded by hostile forces. So Russia had an interest in a stable China, which had driven out imperialism, both from the point of view of allowing the class struggle to develop, and in securing a friendly neighbour for itself.

Sadly, neither the Russians nor the CI realised how successful the CCP was to become, and in how short a time — in the early '20s it looked as if Sun Yat-sen

had more chance of ridding China of foreign powers than the communists did. So the Russians 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 therefore 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 the united front on the KMT's terms, was rejected by the Chinese communists who saw clearly what the KMT was, and were afraid of losing both their independence and their ability to operate.

Trotsky opposed the united front from the beginning, although his opposition was not made public until much later. In 1927 he rubbished the idea of a 'bloc of four classes'. "...This by no means signifies that the imperialist yoke is a mechanical one, subjugating 'all' the classes of China in the 'same' way. The very powerful role of foreign capital in the life of China has caused very strong sections of the Chinese bourgeoisie, the bureaucracy and the military to join their destiny with that of imperialism..."

"It would further be profounder naivete to believe that an abyss lies between the so-called comprador bourgeoisie, that is, the economic and political agency of foreign capital in China, and the so-called national bourgeoisie. No, these two sections stand incomparably closer to each other than the bourgeoisie and the masses of workers and peasants.

"Installed within the Kuomintang

and its leadership, the national bourgeoisie has been essentially an instrument of the compradors and imperialism..."

"It is a gross mistake to think that imperialism mechanically welds together all the classes of China from without...The revolutionary struggle against imperialism does not weaken, but rather strengthens the political differentiation of the classes." (*The Chinese Revolution and the Theses of Comrade Stalin*).

For Trotsky, the revolutionary forces would divide along class rather than national lines. With that division established, everything else followed — the proletarian party should not subordinate itself to the bourgeois nationalists, and should struggle against them. Stalin insisted that the new communist forces engage first and foremost in the struggle against imperialism. This was the policy which led to such disaster.

## Reorganisation of the Kuomintang

On 4 September 1922, Sun Yat-sen announced his intention to reorganise the KMT. The plans were agreed by January of the following year, drawn up with the help of Chen Tu-hsiu, and with input from the CI and Russia. The negotiations included Yoffe, Lenin's ambassador to China. In 1923 Sun began to build an independent nationalist army, sending Chiang Kai Shek to Russia to collect arms and study military organisation.

At the 3rd Congress of the CCP, held in June 1923, the party again debated its relationship with the KMT. Once more, Maring bore instructions from the CI to maintain the 'bloc within', saying that the KMT should take the lead in the national revolution. There was considerable opposition from Chen and others to the bloc, but the CI's position was agreed, and included a statement that the CCP was to maintain its independence within the bloc. In fact, as the communists were soon to learn to their cost, this 'independence' was an illusion. Even though it was CP members who did lead the most radical workers' struggles, this was from within the KMT. The idea of CP independence 'within' the KMT was used by conservative nationalists against the communists, and to agitate against the two parties having such a close alliance.

Despite misgivings (and open antagonism) from both sides, the KMT's first national congress in January 1924 included the communists. It reorganised the party along hierarchical 'soviet' lines, with the communists well represented at every level, particularly in the organisational and labour bureaux. The only place the communists were not able to penetrate was the KMT military council, or to obtain the senior roles in the military fields that they enjoyed in the political work of the KMT. At the Military Academy at Whampoa (established in 1924), communists and Young Socialists made up a large minority of recruits and graduates, but CCP leadership was on the political, rather than the military, side of the

academy's work.

Within the KMT, the CCP organised itself into fractions, and were acknowledged to be the most energetic party workers and organisers. The CP attempted to manipulate the left of the KMT against the right, and so gain the leadership of key areas of party life. In this they were largely successful, but they did arouse opposition from KMT conservatives.

After Sun's death in 1925, the conservatives gradually increased their power behind the scenes, with disastrous consequences for the CCP. The CCP had difficulty retaining an independent class profile in, for example, labour work. The KMT wanted this directed primarily towards nationalist goals, the CCP were not prepared to mislead the working class into thinking that a united China would significantly improve their lot. Some KMT conservatives were landlords and factory owners — the communists' urge was to cut against these people.

Such contradictions abounded and fuelled antagonism between communists and conservatives. It was the class nature of the KMT which caused the contradictions. By 1924 the CCP was again ready to leave. Once again, pressure from the CI, and changes in the political situation kept the front alive. The working class began to recover from the May 7th massacre of railway workers, and to take strike action in Canton and Shanghai, and to build new unions. Cooperation in these activities between CCP and KMT buried their differences amongst the activists. The 4th CCP Congress (25 January) maintained the united front, but Chen criticised those communists who were too subservient to the KMT within it. At the same Congress, the CP (then numbering just under 1,000) decided to relax its membership conditions and attempt to turn itself into a mass proletarian party rather than a mainly intellectual group.

## The events of 1925

By the end of 1925 there were over 10,000 members of the CCP — a wave of powerful strikes swept through China, influenced by communists, new unions were set up and the brutal insensitivity of the imperialists won thousands of recruits to the nationalist and communist causes.

As the CCP relaxed its membership rules, the newly radicalised workers could, and did, join in large numbers. The contradictions between communism and bourgeois nationalism were felt even more strongly, but Stalin's policy remained the same.

The return of workers' confidence was felt in Shanghai where strikes were held against the Japanese owners of the textile mills, and on the railways the National Railroad Union held its second congress in February 1925. The leaders of the powerful Chinese Seamen's Union joined the CCP. The National General Labour Union was formed by 166 unions in 1925, and held a congress in 1925 representing over half a million workers. The union was led by communists, who could now claim to

influence a significant proportion of China's workers. By 1927 the CCP claimed to represent three million organised workers — the unions and other workers' organisations were growing, and as they grew they moved leftwards.

On 15 May 1925 a factory guard killed a striker in the Shanghai cotton mills (which had been on strike since February). This was not the first such incident, and on May 28th the CCP central committee called for co-ordinated protest demonstrations on 30th May. As thousands of demonstrators met on **Nanking Road, International Settlement** Police, under a British officer, opened fire, killing 10 and wounding and arresting scores of others. The response was bigger demonstrations, culminating in a general strike on 1st June. A Shanghai General Labour Union was set up, under communist leadership.

The strikes and protests spread to other Chinese cities, climaxing in the Hong Kong-Canton strike and blockade. The strike was called by the NGLU, and a large supporting demonstration was fired on by British and French troops on 23rd June in Canton. Over 50 people were killed. This intensified the strike, involving those previously moderate and resulted in a boycott of Hong Kong which paralysed its trade. So as not to be forced to work, strikers left Hong Kong for Canton, effectively bringing it to a halt. The strike, supported by the sailors, lasted 16 months, the longest in China's history. Hardly a ship moved in or out of Hong Kong for over a year.

Again, the leaders of this tremendous revolutionary movement were communists. From being a small party composed largely of intellectuals, the CCP had increased its membership tenfold, of which between half and two-thirds were workers.

Obviously, the May 30th movement did not just swell the ranks of the CCP, the nationalist movement benefited as well; merchants and businessmen joined the protests. The CCP worked with these elements inside and outside the united front, but also used the time to tighten up and increase their own propaganda and educational work in the cities.

The communists targetted specific groups like women and youth, and began agitation amongst the peasants, forming peasant associations in several provinces. By 1927 the peasant associations claimed more than 9 million members in 16 provinces. Although much of the basic organisational work was done by communists in the early 1920s, the peasants were more than ready to take their place in the revolutionary struggle. Yet the pressure of the united front with the KMT was to cause the CCP to hold the peasants back from taking land, as it was to cause the communists to hold back strikes.

The situation in China had **changed**. The workers' movement was strong, militant and led by communists. Inevitably it would be held back if the alliance with the KMT was maintained. The workers' struggles had the power to pull sections of the bourgeoisie towards

the left, and also to effectively close down imperialist enterprises in the big cities and ports. The CCP was no longer a couple of intellectuals, but a party rooted in the working class, with mass support. Even the peasants were starting to move, and move with, rather than against, the urban workers. The time had come for the communists to call for the oppressed masses to throw off all their oppressors — Chinese as well as foreign.

In other words, the time had come for the CCP to leave the united front and lead a revolution. As Trotsky put it, in **September 1926: "The revolutionary struggle in China since 1925 has entered a new phase, which is characterised above all by the active intervention of broad layers of the proletariat, by strikes and the formation of trade unions. The peasants are unquestionably being drawn into motion to an increasing degree. At the same time, the commercial bourgeoisie, and the elements of the intelligentsia linked with it, are breaking off to the right, assuming a hostile attitude towards strikes, communists and the USSR."**

"It is quite clear that in the light of these fundamental facts the question of revising relations between the CP and the KMT must necessarily be raised. The attempt to avoid such a revision by claiming that national-colonial oppression in China requires the permanent entry of the CP in the KMT cannot stand up under criticism.

"The leftward movement of the masses of Chinese workers is as certain a fact as the rightward movement of the Chinese bourgeoisie. [The] KMT... must now be torn apart by the centrifugal tendencies of the class struggle. There are no magic political formulas or clever tactical devices to counter those trends, nor can there be..."

"...The CCP must now...fight for direct independent leadership of the awakened working class."

Trotsky goes on to point out that it is the organised strength of the working class which will influence the petty-bourgeoisie, not manoeuvres within the KMT. The Stalinists, by contrast, felt that the time was not right for communism or soviets to be raised in China. They said that the CCP was not ready, and that the KMT must lead the nationalist revolution. In order to remain within the united front the CCP was to moderate its demands and its militancy. As Trotsky put it, "the desire...[is] to convince the bourgeoisie and not to win the proletariat. This kind of position establishes the premises for inevitable retreats before the right, centre and pseudo-left leaders of the KMT." Events were to prove Trotsky right.

At the second congress of the KMT, the question of continuing the united front was again raised by the conservatives. But the left, headed by Wang Ching-wei and including (it seemed) Chiang Kai Shek, held the day.

Within the CP, many, including Chen, thought the time had come to leave the KMT, but Stalin's CI again prevailed. The CCP agreed to maintain the united front, working with the left and opposing the right, but to build their own organisation first in areas where the



KMT was weak.

Chiang had other ideas. He began to talk of 'deceit' from the communists, and on 20 March 1926 declared martial law. He used martial law to move against some Soviet advisers, placing them under house arrest, as well as 50 communists, alleging that they were involved in a plot against the KMT. Chiang said that he did not want to disturb the alliance with Russia, merely take action against plotters, but he laid down limitations on the CP's further involvement in the KMT. These included limits on the number of communists on the KMT executive, a CCP membership list to be supplied to Chiang, no communist to have a leading KMT or government post, and no nationalist to join the CCP without permission. In addition, the ability of the CCP to act separately from the KMT was curtailed.

The coup against the CCP helped consolidate Chiang's own power and influence within the KMT. The only leader who might have stood against him, the 'left' Wang Ching-wei, was having a 'rest cure' in Europe. For the time being at least, Chiang was in control.

Chiang had, in fact, shown his colours, despite his later declaration that he was still friendly to the CI and the USSR. He maintained that he had simply wanted to stop certain Russians and CCPers and promised to restrict the nationalist right-wing as a balance. But, once again, the CI representatives (eg. Borodin) chose to stay with Chiang, urging the communists to keep their heads down and follow the nationalist lead.

Stalin's line had not changed, even though circumstances clearly had. The CCP, led by Chen Tu-hsiu, wanted to move to a 'bloc without', but Stalin insisted on retaining the united front, while telling the CCP to bloc with the left and maintain their independence. Stalin blamed the CCP for failing to sufficiently curb the KMT left, but forbade them to attempt to take over the party, urging instead that they build the left and attempt to turn the centre and right of the KMT against each other. At the same time, he warned them against alienating the bourgeoisie or petty-bourgeoisie as he said these elements could still be influenced by the left.

In fact, none of Stalin's instructions made any sense. There was no real left within the KMT, and the CCP were powerless to create one. The KMT was led by the armed right and centre, and the communists had been subordinated to it by Chiang's manoeuvrings and Stalin's treachery. Because of Moscow's insistence on the maintenance of the united front from within, and Chiang's terms for that, the CCP would do little to turn the mass movements of workers against Chiang — because that would mean turning them against the KMT. Stalin persisted in labelling Chiang a revolutionary and demanded that the CCP conciliate him.

It was obvious to most of the Chinese Communist Party leadership that Chiang's leftism was just a pose, but without breaking with Stalin, they could not fight Chiang, or fight for their own goals. Such 'left' as existed within the KMT was around Wang, who had

already shown his unwillingness to fight Chiang. When things got difficult he just left the political centres for Europe.

## The Northern Expedition

These contradictions became even more obvious when the Northern Expedition (to unify China by armed force against the warlords) began in July 1926. To aid the expedition, the communists stepped up their agitation amongst the peasants along the army's route. The peasants were ready to seize the land, and to fight the landlords and the warlords who maintained them. But the policy of united front prevented the social revolution in the countryside. There were few demands about which the communists and nationalists could agree.

By 1927 the communists were forced to restrain the peasants, urging only seizure of lands from the biggest landlords; the small landlords and those landlords who were part of the KMT were left alone. By the end of 1926 the nationalists had only authorised the demand for a 25% cut in rents for the peasants, while Stalin was demanding that the communists should 'restrain' the peasants, to avoid antagonising the nationalist generals (who were also landlords).

The same was true in the cities, with the labour movement. Armed labour pickets and strikes destabilised the warlords' economy to help the nationalist troops. These activities were organised by unions led by the communists. But as soon as a city fell under nationalist control, the strikes were forbidden and the pickets disarmed. To maintain the united front, the CCP had to help end strikes (like the Hong Kong-Canton strike, called off in October 1926, without major gains).

Yet at the same time as the social revolution was being halted by Stalin's policy, Stalin himself was calling on the CCP to make use of the 'revolutionary potential' of the 'revolutionary nationalist' government. Stalin forbade the CCP to break the terms of the agreement with the KMT on land redistribution, while arguing that the KMT's policy of trying to buy off the urban petty-bourgeoisie by seizing the land of the big bourgeoisie and reducing rents would foster agrarian revolution.

The nationalists did not want social revolution, urban and rural, and the Chinese communists could see that perfectly well, but they were forced to maintain the united front, and at the same time try to stay true to the peasants and workers. It was an impossible situation. To maintain the united front the CP had only one course open to it — to restrain the revolution which they had helped create. Anything else risked a backlash from the KMT right, and the break-up of the united front.

## Shanghai (1927)

As Chiang's armies approached Shanghai, the CCP-led Shanghai GLU began a series of strikes and protests against the warlords and imperialists

who ran the city. In line with Stalin's confused policy, the CCP decided to attempt to take control of the city and hand it over to Chiang's nationalist forces.

With Chiang's troops 25 miles from Shanghai, the SGLU called a general strike, which paralysed the city. There was street fighting, and a bloody repression. The communists called off the strike on 24 February, but prepared for further action. Chiang's forces, which had stopped during the fighting, moved again on 21 March, and a second general strike was called, this time backed up by an armed rebellion.

The workers established a workers' government, which was in effective control of the city, raising demands for improved working conditions. At the same time, with Chiang's troops just outside Shanghai, in other parts of China leftists and union leaders were being repressed by the nationalists. Anti-communist purges took place in various central Chinese cities, and 19 communists were to be executed in Peking less than a month later.

When Chiang arrived in Shanghai on 26 March, he immediately set about preparations for an anti-communist coup. He set up a rival government and negotiated with reactionary forces for an armed showdown. The CI insisted on maintaining the united front, even though it was obvious that Chiang meant to break it decisively.

The communists were instructed to prepare for a coup, but not to provoke it, if necessary hiding their weapons. There was to be no withdrawal from the KMT. At the same time as the CP paper was warning of the dangers of nationalist repression, the workers were still applauding and welcoming Chiang. A small force of pickets was armed and trained, but instructed not to act. The CCP, and thus the workers' organisations, were effectively paralysed.

On 12th April, Chiang's Shanghai massacre began. The CCP organisation and the labour unions were crushed at a stroke, and hundreds of leading communists rounded up. Protest demonstrations were fired upon, killing several hundreds, and in other Chinese cities communists were rounded up and hundreds killed. Unions and labour organisations were outlawed, and many communist leaders were forced to flee the cities or go into hiding. In the space of a few days, thousands of leftists were killed or arrested, and the labour movement brutally crushed. Chiang declared a new national government in Nanking, in opposition to the government in Wuhan — also called a national government.

Chiang's troops, and the reactionary forces he had bargained with (like secret societies) spent days roaming the streets of Shanghai executing workers at random as a 'warning' to others. Demonstrations were ineffective, labour was unarmed for the most part and had not been properly organised to fight back. Even though the communists had expected the massacre since Chiang's troops had refused to enter the city and join in the battle to take power, they were unprepared to lead the workers against

Chiang. The bloody repressions of communists and labour leaders just beginning in other parts of China had pointed to the same conclusion.

The Soviet and CI advisers agreed that Chiang would turn against organised labour in Shanghai. The only people surprised by the events in Shanghai were the workers who had, under communist leadership, welcomed Chiang to the city. Stalin, too, had the gall to evince surprise. A matter of days before the massacre began, the CI and Chiang had exchanged fraternal statements.

On 6th April (six days before the massacre began), Stalin said, of ending the united front: "Why drive away the right, when we have the majority and when the right listens to us?...Chiang Kai Shek has perhaps no sympathy for the revolution, but he is leading the army and **cannot do otherwise but lead it against the imperialists.**" (My emphasis).

In fact Chiang kept his army away from the fight against the imperialists, hoping that the workers would be crushed. When the workers of Shanghai took power away from the imperialists, Chiang led his army against them. A month before, on 17th March, Chiang too went on record, saying: "I have never taken the view that I cannot co-operate with communists...I have also made it clear that while I was opposed to oppression of the communists, **I would check their influence as soon as they grew too powerful.**" (My emphasis). While Chiang's reassurances are not worth the paper they are printed on, he does admit something Stalin would like to conceal, ie. which side of the class struggle he was on.

Trotsky's attitude to the Shanghai coup was one of scorn towards the Stalinists in the CI and China. He all but begged the CCP to reject Stalin's **analysis of the disaster, and criticised** their policy, as always from the perspective of the irreconcilable class forces in China. While *Pravda* 'regretted' Chiang's coup and the bloodbath of Shanghai, Trotsky writes: "Ever more frequently one hears accusations at our party meetings against the 'ultraleft' Shanghaiers and in general against the Chinese workers for having provoked Chiang Kai Shek by their 'excesses'."

**Stalin's attitude to the coup was firstly** to avoid all mention of it, and secondly to shift the blame to anywhere except where it belonged.

Two weeks after the massacre, the CI held a meeting of its executive committee (27 April 1927). NM Roy reported from China, **without once referring** directly to Chiang's coup. "If Roy's abstract terms were translated into concrete reality, we would end up with: Chiang Kai Shek's anti-communist coup 'has strengthened the bonds between the KMT's left wing and the CCP'. Thus the 'bloc of 4 classes' remained; it merely became necessary to get rid of that part of the big bourgeoisie represented by Chiang Kai Shek. The policy of 'KMT-CCP collaboration' remained; it was only necessary to get rid of the 'KMT right-wing' which Chiang represented, and replace it with the 'KMT left-wing' led by Wang Ching-wei. This, then was the

direction given to the 5th Congress of the CCP by the CP representative." (Peng Shu-tse introduction to *Trotsky on China*).

Put at its simplest, Stalin excommunicated Chiang from the KMT-CCP bloc and declared Wang and his Wuhan 'national government' the new revolutionary leaders. Thus the policy before and after Chiang's coup was identical — Chiang's connection with the KMT was ignored, and Wang became its leader. All of this, of course, took place completely outside reality. Chiang and Wang were in the same party, Wang consistently avoided showdowns with the KMT conservatives, even at the time of the coup, and there was no evidence at all that, as Stalin said, "the revolutionary KMT in Wuhan, by a determined fight against militarism and imperialism, will in fact be converted into an organ of the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the peasantry."

These are precisely the things Stalin was saying about Chiang not two months before, when Chiang too was masquerading as a left-winger. In exactly the same way that Chiang had been declared leader of the revolution, Stalin now named Wang. In exactly the same way the CCP was to fall in behind the new, better, more left-wing KMT. The same rules applied: no agrarian revolution, no anti-KMT agitation, no 'excesses', no 'provocation'. Two CCP members joined the 'revolutionary government' in Wuhan as ministers of labour and agriculture. Far from pulling the government to the left, they were in fact used to hold back the revolution. Once again, the revolutionary movements were paralysed, once again the workers and peasants had no independent voice, no independent party fighting for their interests.

As Trotsky put it at the CI meeting: "...Stalin assumes, and wants the International to assume, the responsibility for the policy of the KMT and the Wuhan government, as he repeatedly assumed the responsibility for the policy of the former 'national government' of Chiang Kai Shek (particularly in his speech of April 5, the stenogram of which has, of course, been kept hidden from the International). We have nothing in common with this policy. We do not want to assume even a shadow of responsibility for the policy of the Wuhan government, and the leadership of the KMT, and we urgently advise the CI to reject this responsibility...Politicians of the Wang Ching-wei type, under difficult conditions will unite 10 times with Chiang Kai-Shek against the workers and peasants."

Which, of course, is exactly what happened less than two months later, with more slaughter of workers, peasants and communists. Trotsky's demand was for the CP to call for soviets to pull over KMT troops and unite against the reactionary generals, landlords and imperialists. Trotsky urged the revolutionary masses to leave the KMT and to have no confidence in it — but rather to fight in their own name, and to crush those compromisers who stood in their way. **"The Chinese bourgeois-**

**democratic revolution will go forward and be victorious either in the soviet form or not at all."** (Second speech on the Chinese Question, 24 May 1927, emphasis in original).

Tragically, far from being heeded, Trotsky was hounded and ridiculed by the Stalinist CI. When Wang crushed the labour movement and massacred a peasant army in and around Wuhan and expelled and arrested communists from the KMT (the 'July 15th expulsion') Stalin reacted predictably. He should have admitted that Trotsky had been right all along. Instead he moved further into the realms of fantasy and declared that, far from being defeated, the revolution had moved onto a 'higher plane'.

Trotsky stated that the revolution had been defeated, that the labour movement, the trade unions and the CCP had been smashed. In saying this he was stating bald facts — facts concealed as so many others had been by Stalin. Trotsky pointed out that China would now face a period of reaction and counter-revolution, but for Stalin the time had come for the CCP to declare itself, leave the KMT (they had been expelled anyway!) and organise armed uprisings.

These uprisings were no more than adventures to conceal Stalin's disastrous line. These uprisings were doomed to **failure — and they failed. In Nanchang** in August 1927 those armed revolutionaries still alive after the previous defeat were largely destroyed. The same happened in the 'Hunan-Hupeh Harvest uprisings', the **Haifung soviet** movement and finally in the Canton Insurrection of December. In Canton alone almost 6,000 people were killed.

If there had been any potential for the CCP to go underground, maintain contact with the workers and peasants and start to re-build, Stalin's uprisings had destroyed it. The revolution had been defeated in April, Stalin's adventurism finally killed it, ensuring that few communist cadres were left to fight again. The Chinese Communist Party, thanks to Stalin, had missed its opportunities, confused and misled the workers and peasants and finally destroyed itself.

"Bolshevik policy is characterised not only by its revolutionary scope, but also by its political realism...The greatest task is to know how to recognise in time a revolutionary situation and to exploit it to the end. But it is no less important to understand when this situation is exhausted and converted, from the political point of view, into its antithesis. Nothing is more fruitless and worthless than to show one's fist after the battle..." (Leon Trotsky, 'The Chinese Question after the 6th Congress', 4 October 1928).

Stalin fails on both counts. "Having subordinated the Chinese workers to the bourgeoisie, put the brakes on the agrarian movement, supported the reactionary generals, prevented the appearance of soviets and liquidated those that did appear..." Stalin then blamed **the whole mess on Chen Tu-hsiu, and expelled him from the party** he had founded. Stalin was truly "the gravedigger of the second Chinese revolution." (Trotsky, 'Stalin and the Chinese Revolution', 26 August 1930).

# A Chinese Marxist in the '20s

By Wang Fan-hsi

**I joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1925, at Hangchow in Chekiang province. Then I went to Peking and worked in that district. In 1926 I became a political commissar in the army.**

At that time, the Communist military units were taking part in the Kuomintang's Northern Expedition against the war-lords. But I did not serve in the army long, because the Party wanted me to go back to Peking. At the time, Peking had not been 'liberated', but was under the rule of the Peiyong war-lord, Chang Tso-lin, and his 'white terror'. The Party considered it was more important to do revolutionary work in the reactionary area than in the Army. At that time I was a student of Peking University, so I returned to Peking where I became a leading member of the Party's university committee.

The objective situation and conditions were very favourable, and a growing number of students wanted to enter the Party. In a very short time, the university cell of the Party had a membership of more than two hundred. Then I left the university. After Li Ta-chao and other leaders of the Party were executed in the spring of 1927, I became a member of the Peking district committee of the Party.

Then I went to Wuhan, where I was assigned by the Party to work for the revolutionary newspaper *Mingkuo Yak-po*. Wuhan was the seat of the 'Left Kuomintang' government of Wang Ching-wei. But in the autumn, Wang betrayed the revolution and made a compromise with Chiang Kai Shek. So all the comrades were thrown into confusion. I was soon arrested; I was perhaps the first Communist to be arrested at the time by Wang Ching-wei. I was in prison for one month.

After I was released, the Party sent me to Moscow. I studied in the Eastern University (University for Toilers of the Orient) which contained students of more than seventeen nationalities. It was here that I accepted Trotskyism. This was still in 1927. At that time the struggle between Stalinism and Trotskyism was most severe and strenuous. When I had come to Moscow, of course, I had not known the difference between the two factions. But when I was at Eastern University, I studied the documents issued by the central committee of the CPSU. All these were cut and arranged to favour Stalinism, and yet we could read the difference. Basing our judgement on our experience in China, we concluded that the Trotskyists were right. But in the university there was no Trotskyist organisation.

Then, in the summer of 1928, I was

transferred to Sun Yat-sen University, where we began to organise a Trotskyist tendency. At that time, almost all the students of the Eastern University were won over to Trotskyism and in the Chinese university too Trotskyism was very influential. In the autumn of 1928 we organised a Trotskyist leading committee in the university. This had three members, of whom I was one. We began to organise clandestine work in the Soviet Union, in cooperation with some Russian comrades who were, of course, by then also organising underground. The situation was very difficult, more difficult than that which we found later in China, because of the GPU.

Our clandestine work continued for about one year, from the autumn of 1928 to the summer of 1929. During this period, I was one of the leading members of the Trotskyist tendency in the Soviet Union. I think that at that time there were more than four hundred Chinese Trotskyists, including the comrades in Sun Yat-sen University, those in military schools and some in the Lenin Institute.

In the summer of 1929 I applied to be sent back to China. My application was accepted and I arrived in Shanghai in September of that year. At that time, it was a secret that I was a Trotskyist, so I was able to work inside the Party.

Before we returned to China, we had a meeting in Moscow to discuss how we should work in China. We decided that we should work within the Party to be the best revolutionaries, so that people might know that we were not mere bourgeois intellectuals interested simply in new theories or other novelties, but genuine revolutionaries. We decided that we must prove ourselves to be real revolutionaries through our work for the Party; in that way we would win the confidence of the comrades and be listened to. We thought that we could convince them and win them to our side only in this way. A group of more than twenty Chinese Trotskyists went back to China with me, via Vladivostok, to Shanghai.

When I arrived in Shanghai in September 1929, I was received by Chou En-lai, who at that time was head of both the organisational bureau and the military council of the central committee. I was assigned to work under him, as his assistant in the organisational bureau. So I was put in charge of the Party's work in one of the five districts of Shanghai. Shanghai was the most industrialised city in China, and the work there was directly under the leadership of the central committee rather than under the Kiangsi provincial committee. The Party considered its work in Shanghai to be the most important of all. Under Chou En-lai there were five assistants,

each of whom was assigned to one district of Shanghai. I worked under Chou for about one year.

During this time I kept secret contact with those Trotskyists who had returned to China before me because they had been expelled from the Party in Moscow. They had been expelled from the Chinese Party at the same time as Trotsky was expelled from the Bolshevik Party, since they had been waging an open struggle against the Stalinists. We, on the other hand, had organised only clandestine activity in Moscow, and they did not discover us.

These comrades who had come home before me numbered between thirty and forty. One group of them had gone to Peking, another to Hong Kong, where they had become workers at the Tai-koo Dockyard. Only three of them had come to Shanghai, where they had established a bookshop called New World.

I kept secret contact with these three comrades from the bookshop. They organised the Chinese Trotskyists returning from Moscow, and started to publish an organ called *Our Voice* (*Wo-men-te-Hua*), the title of which was taken from Trotsky's pre-revolutionary Paris paper *Nashe Slovo*. *Our Voice* was the first Trotskyist publication in China. This was in 1929. At that time I was still working within the Party and devoting all my time to Party work. The situation was very difficult, indeed dangerous, and I was in fact once arrested during that time.

In the winter of 1929, the Moscow underground organisation was betrayed and all the Trotskyists were arrested. They were put in prison or sent to Siberia. Nobody was sent back to China. As a result, Sun Yat-sen University was closed down, because it was useless for the Stalinists to run the university only to educate Trotskyists.

An informer testified in court that all the students of the university were Trotskyists. In this way, I too was discovered to be a Trotskyist. When my secret was discovered, I was sick in hospital. Chou En-lai came to have a talk with me, and said: "Moscow says that you are a Trotskyist, but we have worked together for a year already and you have done your work very satisfactorily. So you had better make a declaration that you will give up your positions." I agreed to make a declaration and the next day a messenger came to take it.

In my statement I said that I was a Trotskyist and that the resolution passed at the Sixth (1928) Congress of the Chinese Communist Party was wrong. But I said that I would accept the decisions of the majority. I said that I wanted to work in the Party and reserved the right to speak at the next congress. The messenger took the statement back and immediately the official Party organ *Red Banner* announced that I had been expelled. This was how my connection with the Communist Party ended.

Thereafter, for the next 20 years, Wang was a leading Trotskyist militant in China. He was forced into exile after the Maoist victory.