

Capitalism's Brutal Comeback in China

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Part 1

Introduction

 With the 1949 Chinese Revolution, the workers and peasants of the globe's most populous nation—and one of the worst ravaged by imperialism—rose to their feet and took control of their state and their destiny. Oppressed people around the world were awed and inspired by what the revolution accomplished as it struck one giant, simultaneous blow against feudalism, colonialism and capitalism.

Deep admiration remains for what the Chinese people achieved, despite the wildly careening, often destructive policies of the Maoist bureaucracy, patterned on the Stalinist model of the USSR. The goals and victories of the revolution survived repeated attacks by world capitalism, forced collectivization, the disastrous “Great Leap Forward,” the repression and injustices of the Cultural Revolution, and the stifling of workers’ democracy under the weight of an ever-growing bureaucratic caste.

Since the founding of the Freedom Socialist Party, the FSP has studied and closely followed developments in China. The party has understood the importance of actively defending the world's largest workers state, while at the same time continuing to analyze it critically and to delineate FSP's views about the future of its people, who are so important to the international socialist movement.

At the 1997 FSP convention, the party characterized China as tottering on the brink of capitalist restoration,¹

despite the regime's claims of building "socialism with Chinese characteristics." At that time, the bureaucratized leadership retained some degree of responsiveness to the pressure of social protest as well as some measure of dissent and division within its ranks, factors that allowed for the possibility of changes in direction. A slim opening still existed for the return to a socialist path without the violent upheaval of a revolution.

Five years later, China is no longer wavering at the edge of the precipice. *The Chinese workers state has crossed a threshold and is in a definite transition to capitalism*, one that is only gaining in momentum. Decisive shifts in the economy from public to private ownership have taken place, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has drawn farther away from the workers and peasants, openly redefining itself as a multi-class formation. Only its overthrow can now restore China's revolutionary agenda and make it possible for the workers to reclaim those precious social gains squandered and sold by the CCP, reestablish a centralized, planned economy, and put one-third of the world's population back on the road to socialism.

This grave conclusion represents a major change in FSP's orientation to China. From the time of our founding in 1966 until now, our position has been unique among Trotskyists. Like others, we wholeheartedly supported the Chinese workers state but characterized it as "deformed" from inception by an undemocratic, Stalinist bureaucracy, whose insistence that socialism could be built in one country went hand in hand with accommodation to the international capitalist class. However, in distinction to other Trotskyist organizations, we thought that the Chinese masses might still be able to push the leadership to move further forward toward socialism. We believed that as long as a chance for this remained, even

if unlikely, it would be irresponsible to call for political revolution, which is, in essence, civil war—the forcible expulsion of the bureaucracy won at a potentially very high and bloody cost to the workers.

Today, however, we believe that the possibility no longer exists of peaceably altering the leadership's course, which already has terribly eroded the workingclass advances of the revolution and is clearly and directly leading to their fundamental reverse. A *political* revolution—a revolt that overthrows and replaces the *government*, in this case the ruling CCP bureaucracy—is necessary. And given how far along is the reinstatement of capitalism, this political revolution must also be accompanied by aspects of a *social* revolution—a metamorphosis in basic property relations that changes the *class basis* of the *state*.

Normally, one would either say that a social revolution is needed or not, period: a rose is a rose is a rose. But sometimes a dialectician has to recognize that black and white categories do not serve the purpose. In the case of China, the revolution would need to reestablish the predominance of nationalized industry over private enterprise, the state monopoly over foreign trade, and centralized planning. But this would not be a transformation from scratch; China still has significant nationalized property to build on. This is growing less from year to year, however, making *time* of the essence. The longer a socialist resurgence is delayed, the more entirely will the state sector be consumed, and the greater will be the size and power of the newly reemerging capitalist class.

What is happening in China is not an isolated phenomenon. During the recent past and continuing currently, workers states around the world have been dying slowly—not with the bang of civil war, which Leon Trotsky and others predicted would be necessary to

accomplish such a shattering counterrevolutionary change, but with a whimper, a gradual reimposition of capitalism meeting with no organized revolutionary opposition.

However, Trotsky and his co-thinkers, beginning with V.I. Lenin and the early Bolsheviks, also stressed that no workers state could hold out indefinitely against world capitalism. Their fledgling Soviet Union could only survive as a workers state, they said, through the spread of socialism internationally—concretely, through the establishment of new workers states in some of the *advanced* countries such as Germany and Britain, whose working classes once in power would be able to provide both political solidarity and material help.

But those revolutions in the more well-off and technically advantaged nations, which seemed imminent in 1917, never came to fruition. Not only the USSR but every workers state created subsequently, all of them in poorer and less developed countries, were left to struggle for life with inadequate resources against hostile world capitalism. The fall of the workers states of the Soviet bloc, and now the definitive change in direction of the Chinese workers state, are grim confirmation of Trotsky's assertion that socialism cannot be built in one country—no matter how self-sacrificing and committed to revolution are its people. In fact, it is a profound testament to the strength of proletarian revolution and the spirits of the people who make it that the world's workers states survived for so long against such impossible odds and that Cuba, for one, still holds strong to its socialist vision.

Unfortunately, recognizing the need for political revolution in China today is not the same thing as discovering the leadership to make it. China suffers the vacuum of *revolutionary leadership* that afflicts virtually every country and movement around the world.

That does not mean, however, that there is no resistance in China to the bureaucracy and to the results of its love affair with capitalism. On the contrary, it is burgeoning. Some of the protest and organizing by workers, peasants, women, national minorities, students, and left-leaning intellectuals is quite militant and class-conscious, while some is limited in scope and liberal in perspective. Nearly all of it is taking place only on a local level. But it is obvious that huge numbers of Chinese working people in the cities and the countryside still cling to the advances of their revolution and consider them worth fighting for; undoubtedly, some of today's battles will grow into struggles to be reckoned with.

Yet, never before has it been so clear that the life of the Chinese Revolution, along with the life of socialism as a world phenomenon, rests with revolution in the advanced countries. As long as the workers of the United States, Western Europe, and the other dominant powers do not free themselves, the revolutionary gains made elsewhere, no matter how inspiring, hard-fought, and profound, can only be temporary. The workers and peasants of Russia, China, Yugoslavia, Cuba, etc., lit torches and blazed the trail: now it is up to the rest of us.