

SWP

**discussion
bulletin**

Vol. 17 No. 1

Published by the Socialist Workers Party, 116 University Pl., N.Y.

March 1956

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SWP - DB VOL 17 - #1 - 1956

On the Chinese Question

by James P. Cannon

(Speech at N.C. Plenum, September 16-18, 1955,
Transcribed from Tape Recording)

We have to remind ourselves continually that our theory is not a law laid down to regulate reality, but rather an anticipation of the line of development which reality will take. We don't test the facts against the theory, but vice versa. We test our theory against the reality as it develops. If new facts, that were not foreseen, at one time or another appear to refute our theory in part, that only signifies for us, as Marxists, that we have to introduce some amendments into our theory.

I personally am of the opinion that these new developments of recent years in the Chinese revolution represent a striking confirmation of the theory of the permanent revolution -- if we understand it correctly and if we see the facts as they really are.

Engels often insisted in his letters to America, that our theory is a theory of development. And that of course is true of the Trotskyist advancement of the Marxist theory in the post-Lenin time, or even in the time when Lenin was alive, beginning with 1905. The theory of the permanent revolution is a theory of developments which are to take place, and of the role of the party as a part of these developments.

In the development of historical events we see the two main factors; one is the mass movement which is the great battering ram, and the other is the conscious factor, represented by the party. These two parts of the historical process interact on each other all the time, but not always in the same way and to the same degree. The relation between them could be described as changing, not fixed and always the same.

The spontaneous, elemental movement of the masses, led at every stage by the conscious

party, is merely the ideal form of development. We saw that in 1917 in the Russian revolution. The elemental movement of the masses, led by the Bolshevik Party, accomplished the classic revolution. But even in the Russian Revolution, this ideal relationship of the conscious factor, represented by the party, to the elemental movement of the masses was not established at first. There was a tremendous distortion, or deformation, if you want to call it that, in the first stages.

When the February Revolution broke out the Bolshevik Party wasn't there. In the period from February to the middle of April a part of the Bolshevik Party and its leadership was there, all right, but its policy was incorrect. It was only as the revolution began to develop, in the middle of April with the arrival of Lenin and then in May with the arrival of Trotsky, that that ideal relationship between the party and the class, so magnificently portrayed in the *History of the Russian Revolution* by Trotsky, and confirmed by Sukhanov, was really established. Then you had the ideal situation of an invincible mass movement of the workers led and directed at almost every step by the conscious Bolshevik Party.

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A Process — Not a Single Act

I see the Chinese revolution not as a single act that was accomplished with the military victory in 1949. I see it rather as a process that is still going on, and still far from completed. I don't think the Chinese revolution, after six years of development, has progressed as far as the Russian revolution in its first year.

I see the Chinese revolution as a process that is still going on, with its further develop-

ment and its eventual outcome still unknown, and with variants possible. Our task at the moment is to estimate what stage it is at today, and how we shall characterize it, and what policy we shall recommend.

The military victory of 1949 was obviously only one stage of the revolution. From the start the revolution has been terribly distorted as a result of the defeat and betrayal of the revolution of 1926 and the subsequent policy of Stalinism in the Chinese Communist Party.

Army Played Decisive Role

In this first stage of the revolution, marked by the military victory, obviously the city proletariat did not play a decisive role as they did in the Russian revolution of 1917. I don't know enough about the actual facts to know to what extent they did participate. I am inclined to be a bit skeptical of the report read from some book here, that the city proletariat played no part at all. I believe they were there, but they obviously did not play the decisive part. That was played by the army led by the Stalinists.

That was one feature of the first stage of the revolution, distinguishing it from that of 1917 in Russia -- the absence of the dominating role of the city proletariat. The second big difference was the program proclaimed by the Stalinist leaders at the moment of the victory. That was a program of capitalism.

It seems obvious to me that this military victory of a predominantly peasant army, led by a gang of Stalinists openly proclaiming a capitalist program for the further development of China, could not, by itself, signify the creation of a workers' state.

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Here I disagree quite radically with comrades who say we should have designated the new regime in China as a workers' state from the moment of the military victory in 1949. That gives the Chinese Stalinists far more credit than they deserve.

It is true that we date the establishment of the workers' state in Russia from the conquest of power under the leadership of the

Bolshevik Party in 1917, even though the measures of socialization did not get under way until the following year. But the Bolsheviks took power in the name of a socialist program. The Chinese Stalinists proclaimed a program of capitalism. This difference should not be disregarded. Drastic measures of socialization in China, which belied the Stalinist program, had to be taken before we could recognize a qualitative change in the character of the regime.

Power in the hands of the Stalinists is not in itself equal to a workers' state. In Italy and France, when the German army collapsed there is no question that actual power was in the hands of the partisan movements led by the Stalinists. This was especially true in Italy. If they had so willed, and had had such a program, they could undoubtedly have set up a government. There was nobody in the country with sufficient force to stand up against them.

But instead of setting up a revolutionary government and proclaiming a program of socialism, they deliberately disarmed the partisans and turned the power over to the bourgeoisie. Then the Stalinists entered into the bourgeois cabinet in a coalition government as a supporting force. That was done by the Stalinists in Italy and in France. The Chinese Stalinists might very well have done the same thing, if circumstances had permitted them to.

I was struck by the information that Farrell quoted here -- from the U.S. White Paper -- that on the very eve of crossing the river to the final confirmation of their military victory, the Stalinists were still dickering for a coalition government which would have meant handing the power back to the bourgeois class represented by the Chiang Kai-shek regime.

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To say precisely what kind of regime was established at the moment of the definitive military victory, was a question easier to put than to answer. We were cautious in answering that question in these last six years. For a while we characterized it as a transitional regime. It took us even some time to arrive at that definition of the new regime as a workers

and peasants transitional regime. Evidently this could only be a short term affair. It had to develop one way or another.

The slogan of the workers and peasants government, formulated by Trotsky in the Transitional Program, was the same as that advanced by the Bolsheviks in 1917 for the workers' parties to take power. It was conceived as a transitional regime that could lead to the dictatorship of the proletariat, but not as the dictatorship of the proletariat itself. That could be realized only if and when the program would turn revolutionary and the expropriation of the capitalists would be put on the order of the day.

The Direction of Development

What we had in China, then, was a transitional regime in a process of development. And the question arose: In which direction would that development take place? We had to wait and see before we could definitely label it. The question that we have to answer today, six years later, is this: In what direction did the development actually take place? Did it slide back toward a restoration of the old regime, or did it move towards the elimination of capitalism?

Obviously the direction was anti-capitalist after the first period. The second question that follows from that is this: Has a qualitative turning point been reached in this process of development? Has the economic structure of the regime been so transformed that it must now be characterized as a workers' state, even though a bastardized form of it?

In order to answer that question we have to look at the facts. I am not as familiar with the statistical material as some of the other comrades who have been working on it. But what I have seen and read convinces me that the facts of progress towards expropriation of capitalist ownership and the establishment of new property relations are quite impressive. And I don't agree that this was done altogether without some elements of class war violence.

The reason, perhaps, that the violence of civil war was slurred over and unnoticed, was

that the bourgeoisie were so weak that they couldn't resist; they were just pushed aside. If the capitalists had had the strength and the means to fight, they undoubtedly would have fought. It was a form of civil war that was very one-sided. The Chinese bourgeoisie had no vitality. They couldn't stand up even against decrees, to say nothing of armed force in the field. This force was there, and its mere existence was sufficient.

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Theory of Permanent Revolution Vindicated

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. I think all this tends to show that the laws of historical development, as foreseen in the Trotskyist theory of the permanent revolution, were stronger than the Stalinist wishes and program.

To a large and decisive extent, I believe, the theory of the permanent revolution, as a theory of development, has been vindicated in the steps which the Stalinists in China have been compelled to take despite their programmatic promise and wishes to take a different course. 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 whatever.

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 socialization as a matter of survival.

It became clear that China could not be developed on the bourgeois path. The new regime could get no capital from the United

States, which has practically all the loose capital in the world. The Chinese bourgeoisie themselves wouldn't willingly invest a nickel in the capitalist future of China. The only one possible way to develop the industries of China, or even to keep them going, was the way the Chinese regime of Mao Tse-tung had to take, and that was the road of socialization.

In the evolution of China, the theory of the permanent revolution, as a theory of development in the colonial revolution, has been vindicated quite impressively.

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Question of the Party

How does the theory stand up on the question of the party? A part, and in my opinion an essential part, of the theory of the permanent revolution is that the process of transformation from decrepit colonial capitalism to a socialist order of society, has to be led and directed by a conscious Bolshevik party. A vindication of that side of the theory of the permanent revolution has not been evident in the first six years of the New China. But is this experience conclusive? I don't think so.

I consider this first six years as only a part of a process that has a long way to go, and whose outcome is not yet determined. In my opinion, the theory of the permanent revolution with respect to the party, will be vindicated in the period to come. It is obvious that the imperialists cannot and will not allow China, or even the Soviet Union, to progress indefinitely toward the socialist order of society without a military showdown. The pressure of the situation from all directions will impose upon China an ever more consistent revolutionary policy and leadership. From iron necessity the Chinese revolution must find a conscious revolutionary leadership. That cannot be anything else than a party of conscious revolutionists.

So far we have in China a nucleus. This nucleus will have to expand and eventually replace the Stalinist leadership. All the progress that has been made up to now on the economic field is preparatory for this further vindication of our theory in the political field; pro-

vided of course that we have a correct policy and have confidence in our future, and know how to take advantage of the opportunities that will come later on.

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The Trade Union Analogy

I have tried to find my way in the study of the development of these bastardized workers' states primarily by way of the trade union analogy, which Trotsky utilized so effectively in his arguments about the nature of the Soviet Union in the 1939-1940 discussion. He pointed out there that a workers' state can be called a trade union that has taken power. We do not judge a union entirely by its officers. It is possible for a genuine union to exist with a defective or even treacherous leadership. We distinguish between the two. That trade union analogy has been constantly in my mind throughout these years we have been struggling with the question of these bastardized workers' states.

I have thought particularly of the development of the trade union movement in the United States in the past 20 or 25 years. In the old Communist Party back in the Twenties, we began to realize that the trade union problem of the time in the United States was essentially the problem of organizing the unorganized. Properly speaking, there was no labor movement in the basic industries of the country at that time. We had about two million members of craft unions, mostly skilled and privileged workers. These craft unions dealt mainly with employers representing small aggregations of capital. When it came to the trustified industries, the basic industries in the country, outside the coal fields, which were anachronistic in many ways, there was no unionism whatever.

The resistance of the employers was so terrific and their power was so great, with their spy system and their company police, their financial resources, the press at their disposal, the policy of the state authorities and so on -- that one could not think of organizing these industries the easy way. And the question arose among us: How will we organize the unorganized? We had noted that the only serious attempts in the past had been made through des-

perate strikes which could be led only by radicals and revolutionists. Even the IWW, which was always a small organization, led more important strikes against the basic industries than the whole AFL put together.

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We came to the conclusion that the kind of fight necessary to break the resistance of the entrenched employers in the basic industries would require the leadership of radicals and revolutionists. The old style trade union system of going to see the boss and talking it over with him and negotiating an agreement wouldn't work there. You would have to have radicals who would resort to serious measures of the class struggle.

That was the general opinion in the old Communist Party, and I believe that was basically correct. But within that framework of general agreement, that the organization of the unorganized was the task of revolutionists, there developed a difference of opinion, particularly between me and Bittleman, the documents of which disappeared in one of the burglaries the Stalinists perpetrated after our split with them. It didn't find its way into the press but we had a sort of internal discussion on the question. Bittleman said that the AFL fakers would not and could not organize the basic industries. That was the beginning of the theoretical preparation for the policy of completely independent unions all up and down the line.

The Role of the Bureaucracy

I developed a theory then -- a sort of a half theory -- which anticipated future developments. I held that the resistance of the employers in the basic industries could be broken only by a mass revolt of the workers; that this was the only condition under which we could conceive of organizing unions in those industries. I maintained that when economic pressure produced this revolt a section of the bureaucracy would be compelled, whether it wished to or not, in order to keep contact with the workers and not be left on the sidelines, to give a certain support to the organizing movement, and in some places would even appear as leaders of it.

I was roundly castigated for my illusions about the labor fakers at that time. But I maintained that developments could take that course, since the labor bureaucracy rests on the labor movement and it is not free to determine its own policy at will. While the disposition of the labor skates is to have peace and co-existence with the employers -- they are the original co-existence people -- under pressure of a revolt and the danger of revolutionists taking the labor movement away from them, I said that some of them could be expected to step in and give partial leadership themselves.

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At that time the chief reactionary in the labor movement, the one labor leader most hated and denounced as a strike breaker, and an agent of the class enemy in the labor movement, which he really was, was John L. Lewis. He had come to power in the United Mine Workers Union in the process of breaking strikes in collaboration with the operators, in one place after another.

A whole generation of militant fighters were expelled and driven out of the industry by Lewis. In the Kansas coal fields, which I was familiar with and had had some part in, John L. Lewis actually conspired with the operators to break a strike and set up what a lot of the workers called a company union, and got it recognized by the bosses. Partly by practices of that kind Lewis maintained his power in the United Mine Workers.

I didn't predict that John L. Lewis would be one of the leaders of the organization of the unorganized. That would have been too much even for my imagination in the Twenties, when Lewis was the Number One reactionary in the labor movement. But in the course of events, when the upsurge of the workers came in the Thirties, when the handwriting was written on the wall, it was a section of the reactionary bureaucracy, headed by Lewis and Hillman, which, as you know, actually became the official leaders of the CIO movement, in order to keep it within certain bounds.

The rise and development of the CIO vindicated the basic theory of the communists of the early days that only radicals and revolutionists could organize the trustified industries; that

only a class struggle policy could win strikes against these industries; and that you couldn't build unions unless you first had successful strikes caused by a revolt of the workers and a radical leadership. That basic concept was vindicated all up and down the line. But a section of the conservative bureaucracy also played a part they had never planned, or even dreamed of.

The CIO was really created in a number of strikes of which the outstanding examples were the Auto-Lite strike in Toledo; the sitdown strikes in Detroit and Flint and Akron; the Minneapolis strikes; the strikes of the maritime workers on the Pacific coast. These turbulent strikes, in which radicals played the leading role, really made the new union movement.

The great upsurge spearheaded by these battles eventually culminated in the industrial organization of millions of workers. But the role of a section of the old bureaucracy, represented by Lewis, was also an important factor. This should not be overlooked, for it is germane to our present discussion of the Chinese revolution.

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Organization by Consent

After the big upsurge, we saw another development. The CIO reached a membership of four or five million, but not all of them came the classic way by which workers are organized -- through victorious strikes lead by militants, forcing the bosses to recognize the union. After the CIO got consolidated we saw unions organized in a different way. Many unions were organized by consent of the bosses without strikes. That didn't prove that the bosses wanted unionism or that that was the norm for union organization. That was done only to avoid strikes. The threat of strikes was always there in the background.

The classic doctrine reads as follows: The only way to organize the workers against the powerful employers is by a mass revolt of invincible power, led by radicals with class struggle methods. That's the norm. But in the history of the American trade union movement, especially in the last 15 years, we have seen all kinds of deviations from the norm.

Once the CIO got firmly established, and the labor fakers saw this new federation growing up and outrivalling them in numbers, they began organization campaigns they had never dreamed of before. Of the 15 million workers organized in this country, no more than 5 million are in the CIO. But a large section of these 10 million workers that the AFL accumulated were organized by the AFL fakers in agreements with the bosses without strikes, to head off the CIO. And not all of the CIO unions were organized in the classic form, a lot of them were pushovers.

That might seem to refute the basic contention we started with; that the only way to organize industry is by revolt of the workers, strike action, militant leadership. But that is not really so. Behind these pushover organization campaigns the real power was the power of the existing CIO and the tradition of the revolt of the Thirties.

If we insist on the norm in every case we would have to say that the many unions organized by agreements with the bosses, to head off the CIO -- are not real unions. The fakers, when they started them, planned nice tame unions where the bosses would check off the dues and there would simply be peace and co-existence and nothing else. In many cases they even gave the bosses written promises to that effect, just as the Chinese Stalinists were willing to do.

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The Logic of the Class Struggle

But the logic of the class struggle proved to be stronger than the bureaucrats' designs. These workers happened to want more money and better living just like everybody else. The more the bona fide unions advanced, and every time they gained a few inches anywhere, a discontent would spread through these phony setups of the AFL. The labor fakers would be confronted with demands of the workers for more money. If they didn't get it they would threaten to go to the CIO.

The labor fakers, anxious for peace at any price, went to the bosses, just like Mao Tse-tung went to Chiang Kai-shek, to see if they couldn't make a deal and get a little concession. If the bosses said no the result was that

these almost phony unions -- these deformed unions, you might call them -- were forced into strikes. And many of them were very militant strikes.

In the course of their evolution, independent of the will and the policy of the labor fakers, some of these deformed unions became transformed into quite militant organizations, capable of conducting strikes and advancing and showing the same characteristics as genuine unions. In fact, they became transformed into genuine unions.

Behind all that, as I said, was the influence of the real union movement, which was the CIO built in the Thirties. When they talk about 10 million men in the AFL and 5 million in the CIO, and say that's the relation of forces between them, today, I say that's not the reality. Two-thirds of those people in the AFL really belong to the credit of the CIO. It was the influence and the inspiration of the movement which resulted in the CIO that enabled these labor fakers to gather them in, and enabled the workers to find organization protection there.

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The Relation to Russian Revolution

I think of this trade union experience in the connection between China and the Soviet Union. It is an error to think of the Chinese Revolution as separate from the Russian Revolution. The social transformation in China is not so close and direct as that in Eastern Europe, where the Soviet armies were actually on the ground. Nevertheless, just as in the case of the CIO, the inspiration and the example and the hopes aroused by the Russian revolution in the first place in 1917, raised the Chinese workers to their feet and brought them to revolution in 1925-1926.

Then the victory of the Soviet Union in the war, which brought renewed prestige to the Soviet Union throughout the Orient, and new confidence and new hope to the colonial people, was one of the big factors, one of the big motive powers in the Chinese revolution that came to military victory in 1949.

The Chinese revolution is still moving in the same direction as that in Russia, although not at the same pace as the Russian revolution moved under Bolshevik leadership in 1917. I believe that the Chinese revolution has to be considered in that sense as an extension and continuation of the October revolution in Russia. It shows all the tendencies to develop the same characteristics, although its development is slower and less consistent than the Russian development under a conscious leadership.

In Russia the expropriation of the bourgeoisie took place within one year after the victory. In China it is dragged out over six years and is by no means completed yet. We have yet to hear the proclamation of a completely socialist policy in China. We have yet to see the Chinese revolution find the consistent leadership of a revolutionary party, as our theory of the permanent revolution presupposes.

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But in what direction is China moving? What direction has it taken since 1949? As far as I can judge the facts, the direction is almost in a straight line, in the same way as that taken in the Soviet Union. We can attribute the slowness of it, the deformations, the uncertainty of the future, to the fact that the conscious factor has not caught up yet with the objective forces pushing it forward.

But I believe the trend is clear. We have enough facts of socialization, of capitalist elimination, of developments toward the soviet form of social organization, to say that a point of qualitative change has been reached; and that there is no longer a real capitalist basis in the economy in China. The character of the regime there must be designated accordingly.

The NC Resolution is correct in saying it is a workers' state, horribly disfigured and deformed, with an unqualified leadership which endangers its future, but that its basic class character is established by these facts. The political tasks outlined in the Resolution follow from this analysis of the character of the regime.