



CHAIRMAN GONZALO'S
LEGACY OF STEADFAST
REVOLUTIONARY PRINCIPLE
AND STRATEGIC INNOVATIONS

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On 11 September 2021, the international proletariat and oppressed people of the world lost one of the greatest revolutionary leaders of the last several decades. Abimael Guzmán, AKA Chairman Gonzalo, leader of the Communist Party of Peru–Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso), passed away, having spent the last nearly thirty years of his life in prison. We do not know the exact cause of his death and must treat information coming from his captors with skepticism. Gonzalo had been kept isolated from the outside world, denied much contact with even his lawyer. He was suffering from health problems in the last months of his life and was denied adequate access to medical treatment.

Following the announcement of Gonzalo's death, the bourgeois media has been busy howling in unison about the supposed carnage caused by Gonzalo through his leadership of the revolutionary people's war that rocked Peru from 1980 through the 1990s. The reality is that the masses of Peru during that period were suffering from bitter poverty and even starvation caused by the workings of capitalism-imperialism, with the United States, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank holding Peru hostage to debt payments and mandating structural adjustment policies that further impoverished the Peruvian people. What Gonzalo's leadership achieved was to give the Peruvian masses a means to not only fight back, but to dare to overthrow the system of capitalism-imperialism at the root of their suffering and create a whole new social order.

Born in 1934 in Mollendo, Peru, Gonzalo became a philosophy professor at the National University of San Cristóbal de Huamanga in the capital of the Ayacucho region in 1962. He was no armchair philosopher, however; by that point he was a devoted communist, and he used his university position to reestablish communist organization and to learn about the lives of the masses in Ayacucho. Gonzalo combined his love for the oppressed with a keen grasp of the greatest advances in theory and practice in the international communist movement. He firmly rejected the betrayal of communist principles by the leadership of the Soviet Union following

Stalin's death and embraced Mao Zedong's radical innovations to the communist tradition, including the strategy of protracted people's war in semi-feudal oppressed nations and the recognition of the persistence of class struggle under socialism. On the latter innovation, Gonzalo gained first hand experience by visiting China during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a mass revolutionary movement launched and led by Mao to overthrow capitalist roaders within the Communist Party and further revolutionize socialist China. He internalized the lessons of this all-out struggle, and, when capitalist roaders took power in China in 1976 following Mao's death, Gonzalo stood firmly behind communist principles, condemning the counterrevolutionary coup and upholding Mao's revolutionary legacy.

Beyond standing firmly on the right side of fundamental dividing lines in the international communist movement, Gonzalo also applied the lessons of the Chinese revolution to the concrete realities of Peru. He recognized the rural Indian masses of Ayacucho as a potential revolutionary force that could take advantage of its distance from the center of bourgeois power in Peru to launch a revolutionary people's war. Gonzalo worked tirelessly to recruit his students at the university as communist cadre and ingeniously used their connections to rural communities, including when they worked as teachers in those communities after graduation, to develop an organized mass base for revolution. This process of social investigation, the recruitment and training of cadre, and the development of mass organization and struggle that began in the 1960s laid the groundwork for attacks on police stations and local oppressors when the people's war in Peru was initiated in 1980. Ayacucho fast became a center of revolutionary struggle, with the leadership of the Communist Party of Peru (hereafter referred to as Sendero Luminoso) inspiring bold struggle and heroic sacrifice from the revolutionary masses in the face of vicious brutality by the Peruvian military.

Gonzalo knew that for revolution to prevail in Peru, it would

need to spread beyond the Andean highlands of Ayacucho. In the 1970s and 1980s, the population of Peru's capital and largest city, Lima, was swelling with migrants from rural areas facing economic ruin, who settled in growing slums, and eked out an existence as proletarians working unstable jobs. Gonzalo recognized the potential for a revolutionary force to emerge from this slum-dwelling proletariat, laying the groundwork by recruiting Sendero Luminoso cadre from the outskirts of Lima in the 1970s. Through the 1980s, Lima increasingly became a theater of revolutionary warfare, with Sendero Luminoso seeking to build red political power in the slums and carrying out bombings, assassinations, and raids on police stations right at the center of the Peruvian bourgeoisie's power.

From its initiation in 1980 to the early 1990s, the people's war in Peru continued to expand, develop local red political power, and inflict blows on the enemy in the face of harsh repression. Gonzalo's leadership was pivotal to navigating the twists and turns of the revolution, building the communist vanguard and a revolutionary military under its leadership, and swinging sections of the petty-bourgeoisie over to the side of the revolution, including the many lawyers who fought for imprisoned revolutionary combatants. While these advances were a great inspiration to revolutionaries and oppressed people around the world, they increasingly frightened the international bourgeoisie. With United States support, the Fujimori regime launched ever more vicious repression against the revolution and devoted tremendous resources to finding and capturing Gonzalo. After he was finally captured on 12 September 1992, Gonzalo stood firm, delivering a defiant speech from a cage before international media in which he insisted that his capture was merely a bend in the road and that the revolution could still prevail.

Unfortunately the people's war in Peru was never able to recover from this bend in the road. Sendero Luminoso continued to launch impressive military assaults against the Peruvian bourgeois state for approximately one year after Gonzalo's capture, but

the amount and level of revolutionary military actions declined afterwards. Several other top leaders of Sendero Luminoso were captured after Gonzalo, and though others stepped up to fill their places, these captures weakened the ability of Sendero Luminoso to overcome real obstacles. Furthermore, a right opportunist line emerged within Sendero Luminoso calling for negotiations with the Peruvian government and an end to the people's war, claiming it was impossible to continue the revolution in the face of considerable difficulties. At various times, the Peruvian government has claimed that Gonzalo supported the call for negotiations. Since Gonzalo was held in isolation in Peruvian prisons and denied contact with the outside world, it is impossible to know for certain what his political views and state of mind were since his capture. His death now means that we will likely never know. Moreover, while revolutions can take great inspiration and even strategic guidance from revolutionary leaders who have been imprisoned, revolutions can never be led from inside a prison cell for obvious reasons.

Whatever Gonzalo's views were in the years before his death, we can and must uphold his tremendous contributions to the international communist movement and his important innovations to revolutionary strategy. As the international communist movement

Chairman Gonzalo, ever defiant, even under the harshest conditions.



fell into disarray following the loss of socialist China and many communists capitulated, Gonzalo firmly upheld the revolutionary advances in socialist China under Mao's leadership, condemned the restoration of capitalism in China, and fought for the universal principles established by Mao's revolutionary leadership. In the 1980s, as the international proletariat lacked a socialist state and confronted the dual reactionary forces of US imperialism and Soviet social-imperialism, Gonzalo's leadership of the people's war in Peru demonstrated that there was an alternative. Gonzalo inspired tens of thousands of Peru's most oppressed to raise their heads, take up arms, and fight to establish a new base area for world revolution. Sendero Luminoso's consistent internationalism, always thinking of the revolution in Peru as a means to advance the world revolution rather than simply liberate Peru, is something to emulate. *It is no exaggeration to say that the revolutionary people's war in Peru played a decisive role for the international communist movement and the international proletariat by demonstrating, through tremendous sacrifice, that communist revolution was not defeated, once and for all, by the triumph of counterrevolution in China.*

Furthermore, Gonzalo's leadership contributed several strategic innovations to the international communist movement. In the course of preparation for people's war, Gonzalo skillfully demonstrated ways to use the bourgeoisie's ideological state apparatuses, in particular its education system, to recruit communist cadre. During the people's war, Gonzalo's leadership revealed the potential of urban slums as base areas for revolution and forged strategy and tactics for bringing revolutionary warfare to the bourgeoisie's centers of power. These innovations to the strategy of protracted people's war are of tremendous importance to revolutionaries today given the massive growth of slums in Africa, Asia, and Latin America over the last several decades and the need for revolutionary military strategy in the urban domain.

The leadership of Gonzalo and Sendero Luminoso was not without shortcomings, however, and this should not surprise us as dialectical materialists. These shortcomings should neither tarnish

the revolutionary legacy of the people's war in Peru nor prevent us from learning its valuable lessons. But we should not ignore these shortcomings; instead, we must subject them to criticism. Gonzalo and Sendero Luminoso tended to treat Marxism-Leninism-Maoism in a way that veered towards a religion, and Gonzalo's leadership was often treated as infallible. These tendencies breed dogmatism and religiosity, which leave the masses ill-equipped to deal with difficult contradictions that require rigorous debate and critical minds. Where these tendencies towards dogmatism and religiosity have been embraced and magnified by those posing as Gonzalo's followers, especially in imperialist countries, they have unfortunately but understandably alienated many people from Marxism-Leninism-Maoism and the people's war in Peru. Rejecting dogmatism and religiosity need not mean reneging on the fundamental principles of revolution and communism; in fact, it is only through a thoroughly dialectical and materialist approach that we can truly uphold and, more importantly, *apply* those principles.

By upholding the principally positive aspects of—*but critically engaging*—Gonzalo's legacy and leadership, we should be able to more accurately assess any other shortcomings of the people's war in Peru. For example, were some people incorrectly targeted as enemies during the course of the revolution, either tactically or strategically? Was there too much emphasis on the purgative function of violence and the militarization of the Party? These questions can only be answered with concrete analysis of the historical experience, and *without* the thoroughly bourgeois cry that “they should not have taken up arms.” The people's war in Peru exposed the fact that the organized Left, when faced with revolution by the masses, has and will side with the bourgeoisie over and over again. We should not be squeamish about what that means concerning the use of revolutionary violence, even as we critically assess particular tactics.

A comprehensive account of the people's war in Peru and Gon-

zalo's leadership remains to be written from a communist perspective. The best thing we can do to honor the life of Chairman Gonzalo is study the history of the revolution in Peru, learn its valuable lessons (positive and negative), and apply Gonzalo's important innovations to our own circumstances. *kites* has already published several articles in that spirit,¹ and we look forward to engaging with others, including internationally, in the process of summation. For the international communist movement can only advance by learning from the rich experiences of all our comrades around the world in the spirit of proletarian internationalism. This is how we will honor Chairman Gonzalo.

¹ See Kenny Lake's "On Infantile Internet Disorders and Real Questions of Revolutionary Strategy" in *kites* #1 and "When We Ride on Our Enemies" in *kites* #3.

