

Critical electoral support for reformist parties

Mon, 30/05/1983 - 10:59

It is an essential purpose of the united front tactic to break the mass of reformist ? influenced workers from their leaders and unite with communists. Yet because the central political claim of the reformist leaders is that they can utilise bourgeois state power to satisfy the needs of the working class, it is necessary for communists to find ways of putting reformists to the test while in government.

At its most elementary level this takes the form of giving critical electoral support to the candidates of bourgeois workers' parties. Lenin explained both the purpose and the form of this tactic in his advice to the British Communists in 1920:

?If we are the party of the revolutionary class, and not merely a revolutionary group, and if we want the masses to follow us and unless we achieve that we stand the risk of remaining mere windbags) we must, first, help Henderson or Snowden to beat Lloyd George and Churchill (or rather compel the former to beat the latter because the former are afraid of their victory!); second, we must help the majority of the working class to be convinced by their own experience that we are right; i.e. that the Hendersons and Snowdens are absolutely good for nothing, that they are petit ? bourgeois and treacherous by nature, and that their bankruptcy is inevitable; third, we must bring closer the moment when on the basis of the disappointment of most of the workers in the Hendersons, it will be possible, with serious chance of success, to overthrow the government of the Hendersons at once.?

Although Lenin was here talking to communist groupings consisting of only several hundreds and not yet united into a single party, he was adamant about the form the tactic should take:

"We would take part in the election campaign, distribute leaflets agitating for communism, and in all constituencies where we have no candidates, we would urge the electors to vote for the Labour candidate and against the bourgeois candidate. Comrades Sylvia Pankhurst and Gallagher are mistaken in thinking that this is a betrayal of communism, or a renunciation of the struggle against the social traitors. On the contrary, the cause of communist revolution would undoubtedly gain thereby."

Indeed, it was the very small size of communist forces and their distance from the working class that necessitated the use of the tactic: "At present, British Communists very often find it hard even to approach the masses, and even to get a hearing from them.

If I come out as a communist and call upon them to vote for Henderson and against Lloyd George, they will certainly give me a hearing. And I shall be able to explain in a popular manner not only why the Soviets are better than a parliament and why the dictatorship of the proletariat is better than the dictatorship of Churchill (disguised with the signboard of "bourgeois democracy") but also that, with my vote, I want to support Henderson in the same way as the rope supports a hanged man ? that the impending establishment of a government of Hendersons will prove that I am right, will bring the masses to my side, and will hasten the political death of the Hendersons and Snowdens just as was the case with their kindred spirits in Russia and Germany."

As in all variants of the united front, the compromise involved in taking common action alongside workers, in this case voting for "their" candidates, does not in the least imply any compromise on the political programme of the communists. This is why there is no contradiction between standing communist candidates in some constituencies and voting for reformists in others.

In both cases the whole election is used as a vehicle for the explanation of the communist programme. Where communists do give critical support they raise immediate and certain transitional demands ? demands that meet the most burning needs of the masses on the reformists. These demands are designed to mobilise workers in struggle to force a reformist party in government to act in the interests of workers, and to organise the workers to struggle for them independently if the reformists refuse to carry them out.

Both of these elements of critical support ? demands on reformists, and organising independent struggle in pursuit of these demands ? are crucial because a government of a bourgeois workers' party (i.e. a bourgeois workers' government) will inevitably be the tool of capital against the working class. Organising for struggle is vital to prevent defeat and demoralisation amongst the masses when this becomes clear in practice.

At the same time, the communists put forward their own programme, counterposing it to the reformist programme, even where they do not stand communist candidates. To win workers to a revolutionary alternative it is necessary to spell out, even for the duration of the united front (in this case, basically the election campaign) what the alternative is.

The tactic of critical electoral support flows solely from the existence of the organic relationship between the bourgeois workers' party and the working class. It is not in any way predicated upon the programme or promises of the reformists. Communist agitation and propaganda for electoral support must not be open to interpretation as support for the reformists as a "lesser evil" than the open bourgeois parties.

The purpose of bringing the reformists to power is precisely to put them to the test, to prove that they are indeed as willing as the open bourgeois parties to defend the class rule and state power of the bourgeoisie and to attack the working class to serve that end. Similarly, communists do not divide their critical support for the bourgeois workers' party, giving it to "left" candidates but not the "right".

When discussing the question of critical support for the Labour Party in Britain from the ILP (November 1935) Trotsky insisted that such support had nothing to do with the question of sanctions against Italy after its invasion of Abyssinia:

"Question: Was the ILP correct in refusing critical support to the Labour Party Candidates who advocated sanctions? Answer: No. Economic sanctions, if real, lead to military actions, to war. The ILP itself has been saying this. It should have given critical support to all Labour Party candidates, i.e. where the ILP was not itself contesting. In the "New Leader" I read that your London division agreed to support only anti ? sanctionist Labour Party candidates.

"This too is incorrect. The Labour Party should have been critically supported not because it was for or against sanctions but because it represented the working class masses . . . The war crisis does not alter the fact that the Labour Party is a workers' party, which the governmental party is not. Nor does it alter the fact that the Labour Party leadership cannot fulfil their promises, that they will betray the confidence that the masses place in them.

"In peace time the workers will die of hunger if they trust in social democracy; in war, for the same reason, they will die from bullets. Revolutionists never give critical support to reformism on the assumption that

reformism, in power, could satisfy the fundamental needs of the workers . . . No, in war as in peace, the ILP must say to the workers; 'The Labour Party will deceive you and betray you, but you do not believe us. Very well we will go through the experience with you but in no case do we identify ourselves with the Labour Party programme.' "

The relationship between the bourgeois workers' parties and the working class can be extremely deep ? rooted, in some countries over a century old. The experience of one or two terms of office, particularly in periods of relative capitalist expansion, may not be enough to break that relationship and win the mass of workers to communism.

This does not alter its tactical nature. The bringing to power of the reformists is never, and can never be, a strategic or necessary programmatic objective of the working class. The tactic has to continue to be used so long as the masses have not broken from their reformist leaders, even where revolutionaries might believe that the workers have already experienced enough to turn against them, a point once again made by Trotsky:

"It is argued that the Labour Party already stands exposed by its past deeds in power and its present reactionary platform. For example, by its decision at Brighton. For us ? yes! But not for the masses, the eight millions who voted Labour."

Whilst the tactic of critical electoral support is most generally applicable to mass ? based bourgeois workers' parties it can, in certain circumstances, be applied to smaller reformist or centrist formations. Again the deciding factor is that of the relationship of such currents to the working class, or sections of the working class. Where small reformist or centrist groups represent a genuine break to the left by workers or oppressed groups it is possible that illusions in their incomplete, or false, programmes can best be dispelled via the use of critical support.

However, such a tactic has to be very carefully weighed in its context. Communists must oppose any tendency in such formations to turn their backs on the working class who still support the major reformist party. In general the tactic of critical support by communists for other parties, applies to the other (bourgeois) workers' parties. Exceptions to this occur support for revolutionary nationalists who are leading an anti-imperialist struggle, can, under certain circumstances, be granted.

Despite the different class base of such parties in the specific cases where critical support is granted, all of the guidelines for this variant of the united front apply. In no sense do we politically support (that is, subscribe to) the programme of petit-bourgeois revolutionary nationalists. Where centrist or reformist currents stand for election without significant working class support, they should be opposed. Support for such candidates could only be interpreted as support for their politics which communists can never give. Even more is this the case with petit-bourgeois currents such as ecologists and peace campaigners.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/critical-electoral-support-reformist-parties>