

# MRCI Theses: The anti-imperialist united front

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The overthrow of Marcos, the growth of Sinn Fein, the struggle of the Tamils for Eelam all involve a conflict with imperialist or a fight for bourgeois democratic demands rights. These theses of the MRCI outline the tactics of communists towards non-proletarian classes in this struggle

1. The tactics of communists in relation to bourgeois and petit-bourgeois led movements coming into struggle with imperialism was outlined in essence at the Second Congress of the Communist International (CI). Lenin's theses put forward the possibility of forming an 'alliance' with these forces on two conditions. One, that they were in practice leading a struggle against imperialism and two, that such an alliance placed no restrictions on the communist's independent activity aimed at organising the workers and peasants against imperialism. The theses sowed no illusions in either the willingness or the ability of the 'national revolutionary' movement i.e. the bourgeoisie, to take the struggle through to the end, to break the stranglehold of imperialism. They emphasised that 'a determined fight' needed to be waged against painting these movements in communist colours. Independence of propaganda, organisation and action was necessary because the national bourgeoisie would vacillate and compromise in the struggle against imperialism.

2. The tactic of the united front in the colonial and semi colonial world was developed more fully at the Fourth Congress of the CI. Its development was part of the discussion and elaboration of the united front tactic undertaken between the Third and Fourth Congresses, in particular in relation to the social democratic parties and their trade unions in Europe. In the period directly after the Russian Revolution and during the revolutionary crisis which gripped Europe after World War I there was little stimulus to develop the Bolsheviks' 1917 practise into generally applicable tactics for the CI, since the mass influence of the social democratic leaderships appeared to be on the point of collapse. As Trotsky said 'if we consider the party is on the eve of the conquest of power and working class will follow it, then the question of the united front does not arise.' Within the CI the creation of communist parties, the building of soviets and the armed insurrection were the tasks central to a revolutionary situation. By 1921, however, it was clear that this revolutionary situation had passed. Capitalism, aided and assisted by the treacherous social democratic and labour leaders, had managed a temporary stabilisation. Recognising the changed situation and the strength of reformism in Western Europe, CI launched the united front tactic at the Third Congress under the slogan 'to the masses'. After this Congress the ECCI developed the tactics that became known as the united front.

3. The workers' united front was a tactic, or a series of related tactics, aimed at winning the mass of the working class to revolutionary communism, to the programme of the revolutionary party and for the dictatorship of the proletariat. Not through propaganda alone but through action, and in struggle:

'Only by leading the concrete struggles of the proletariat and by taking them forward will the communists really be able to win the broad proletarian masses to the struggle for dictatorship.' (Theses on Tactics 3rd Congress).

As a tactic the united front was subordinate to this strategic goal. To turn the united front from a tactic to a strategy, where bringing it into being (or its maintenance once achieved) becomes the perpetual long term goal, can only lead to the liquidation of the revolutionary programme; a necessary consequence of the continuation of a long term alliance with the non-revolutionary parties or organisation.

4. Notwithstanding the common method of the united front which underpins both the workers united front and the anti-imperialist united front (AIUF), there are important differences between them. The workers united front in the imperialist nation rests on the unity in action of the workers organisations and their parties. Communists fight within such united fronts, however limited, to develop the demands of the common struggle, through the use of transitional demands, to a struggle to overthrow capitalism. This necessitates the fight to develop the united front, in acute periods of class struggle, into soviets and the struggle for the workers government. The AIUF however develops on the terrain of minimum or democratic demands-the struggle against imperialist domination, for national independence and unity, for democracy and democratic rights. Into this struggle it seeks to draw, not only the workers' organisation, but those of the petit- bourgeoisie-the organisations especially of the peasantry, the small urban property holders, the professionals, teachers etc-and even sections or elements of the national bourgeoisie itself, where ever the latter is compelled to resist imperialism by the pressure of the masses. The fight by communists to win the workers, poor peasants and the urban petit-bourgeoisie to the perspective of socialist revolution, to transform the struggle for democracy and against imperialism into a struggle against capitalism and for the dictatorship of the proletariat, to the extent that it is successful, must break up and replace the AIUF. The fight to win the masses from the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois leaders and their parties, the struggle to create workers soviets in the towns and soviets of poor peasants and agricultural proletarians in the countryside, is part of the struggle for a workers and peasants government; a government where the peasants have been broken from their bourgeois and petit-bourgeois leaders and won to the support of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

5. The united front by its very nature is a temporary agreement. Nine times out of ten, where there exists no especially favourable relation of forces or political situation, the reformist or nationalist leaders will refuse it and do their utmost to prevent their rank and file from participating. Where it is struck it will be around clear, precise and limited objects of real struggle. Its primary aim is not to produce joint propaganda (if it did it would be a propaganda bloc not a united front) but agitation around the action goals of the united front.

6. The Communist International made clear that the united front was not just an 'appeal to leaders'; even less was it a proposal for a purely parliamentary combination or bloc:

The united front means the association of all workers, whether communist, anarchist, social democrat, independent or non-party, or even Christian workers, against the bourgeoisie. With the leaders if they want it so, without the leaders if they remain indifferently aside, and in defiance of the leaders and against the leaders if they sabotage the workers united front.' (ECCI April 1922)

Thus the appeal for the united front was both from 'above and below'. But, 'the real success of the united front depends on a movement "from below", from the rank and file of the working masses' (Theses on Tactics 4th Congress).

7. The striking of the united front does not for one moment mean agreeing to end criticism. For the CI there were to be no diplomatic silences or glossing over of past or present vacillation and betrayals by the reformist leaders. Communists within the united front;

?While accepting a basis for action must retain the unconditional right and possibility of expressing their

opinion of the policy of all working class organisations without exception, not only before and after the action is taken but also if necessary during its course. In no circumstances can these rights be surrendered.' (ECCI December 1921) Further more to maintain the united front in a bloc with reformist leaders during or after a betrayal in action, would be to become complicit in it. If it is important to know when to make a united front, it is equally important to know when to break it and thus issue an immediate warning to the rank and file workers that treachery is afoot.

8. The type of organisation appropriate to the united front is an organ of struggle not of propaganda for a programme. As such, a trade union is in one sense a united front. More correctly a united front creates ad hoc fighting bodies commensurate to the task in hand. These may be strike committees, councils of action and at the highest level soviets. Such bodies, vital for the struggle, strengthen the pressure on the reformist leaders to 'break with the bourgeoisie'. A united front can therefore take many forms, it can be extremely episodic-for a single demonstration, rally, strike---or it can be of a 'higher' form, involving a series of actions and agreements-a military bloc, a rank and file opposition in the trade unions like the British 'Minority Movement' of the 1920's. Whatever form it takes, it is a block for action in defence of working class interests, in which the communists neither boycott nor submerge their own programme, and they 'march separately, strike together'.

9. The united front is not limited to defensive trade union or extra-parliamentary struggles. It is taken on to the electoral arena where reformist parties dominate the working class. It also takes up the question of government and governmental demands. The resolution on tactics at the Fourth Congress makes clear that the slogan for a workers' government 'is an inevitable consequence of the united front tactic'. The partial struggles of the working class inevitably run up against the structures of the capitalist state, against the government of the day and its policies. The communists have to provide society wide answers to the problems facing workers, they place demands on the workers' leaders, put forward a programme for a workers' government. But these are not just left as demands; they are fought for within the rank and file of the working class belonging to all workers' parties and none, in a united front struggle to implement them via workers' control in the factories, through the fight for soviets, via the general strike etc.

10. The basis of the anti-imperialist united front rests on the clash of interests between the peoples of the imperialised countries and the imperialist bourgeoisie. Imperialism promotes industrial development in the imperialised countries but in a stunted and lopsided form. The imperialist banks and monopolies dominate their economies, extracting super-profits in the form of repatriated profits and usurious interest payments on loans. They impose their constrictions on the economies through the imperialist agencies such as the IMP, World Bank, etc, and inevitably because of the impossibility of imposing such exactions democratically over any period, in alliance with the most reactionary elements tied to imperialism-the military hierarchy and landed oligarchy. The demand for 'independent economic development', for alleviation from debt, for state capitalist industrialisation, protectionism, land reform, and constitutional democracy, reflects the needs of those sections of the bourgeoisie and petit-bourgeoisie which suffer most from the straight jacket of imperialist domination. These demands can lead to episodic clashes between the bourgeoisie of the semi- colony and the imperialist bourgeoisie (or its agents within the country) as in the case of the struggle against Somoza in Nicaragua.

11. However, because of the weakness of the bourgeoisie in the semi-colonial world, the degree to which important sections of it are tied economically to imperialist capital itself, and most importantly, because of its fear of the revolutionary mobilisation of the masses, which threatens its own rule as well as that of the imperialists, the national bourgeoisie only exceptionally leads or throws its weight behind serious struggles against imperialism. As a result in many countries in the twentieth century the leadership of the anti-imperialist movements has fallen to the petit- bourgeoisie. But in the vast majority of cases its programme

has remained faithful to that of the bourgeoisie despite the attempt to delude the workers by cloaking itself in socialist or communist colours - Nyrere's 'African Socialism', Mugabe and the Ethiopian Derg's 'Marxism-Leninism', the FSLN's Sandinism, etc.

12. Where the bourgeoisie or sections of it, or the petit- bourgeoisie, enters into a struggle with imperialism it is obliged to draw and lean on the mass of workers and peasants. In such cases it is the duty of communists to enter such a struggle alongside these forces. The anti -imperialist united front aims to break the hold of the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois nationalists over the masses, in struggle. The communists neither stand aside in a sectarian fashion nor do they hide their criticisms of these leaderships or the goals for which they struggle. Unlike the popular front which is a cross class coalition subordinating the interests of the working class to the programme of the bourgeoisie, the AIUF confines itself to concrete joint actions, specific agreements which take forward the struggle against the imperialists, within which the communists retain both freedom of criticism and propaganda. Such united fronts, given the compromising role of the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois nationalist, are likely to be extremely episodic and temporary. There is no question of tailoring the slogans of struggle to those considered acceptable to the bourgeoisie, let alone 'reserving a seat' in the united front.

13. The conclusions Trotsky drew for the International Left Opposition from the Chinese revolution of 1923-7 were not that the tactic of the AIUF had to be abandoned but that its opportunist distortion led to disaster. Under the leadership of Bukharin and Stalin the tactic had been gutted of its revolutionary content The Chinese Communist Party abandoned its independence and submerged itself inside the bourgeois Koumintang (KMI). It had, under the guidance of the Comintern painted up the KMT leadership in communist colours, lauding its anti-imperialist credentials and abandoning all criticism of it. It had boycotted the demands of the workers and peasants which threatened to rupture its alliance with the bourgeoisie. It had turned the AIUF into a popular front which delivered the Chinese proletariat into the hands of the counter-revolution.

14. Stalin and Bukharin were aided in this by the lack of clarity of the governmental slogans put forward by the CI in its discussions of the AIUF tactic. The Chinese revolution proved the slogan of the 'Revolutionary Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Peasantry' not only redundant but capable of being perverted into a call for a separate bourgeois stage of the revolution. In this sense, in Trotsky's words, the slogan became a 'noose' hung round the neck of the proletariat. It implied that a bourgeois solution to the struggle against imperialism was the goal which the proletariat fought for with the united front The Chinese events reaffirmed the necessity of the perspective of the permanent revolution, the struggle for soviets and the workers and peasants government Such a perspective does not mean that the AIUF can only be struck around such demands. In periods of defeat or where the masses are emerging from long periods of dictatorship, the united front may well be agreed around democratic demands, rights of free speech and demonstration, release of all political prisoners etc. The fight for a democratic constituent assembly can become an important goal of an AIUF where it is part of the struggle to overthrow an imperialist backed dictatorship. The fight for the expropriation of the landowners and for an agrarian revolution would figure centrally in the struggle for such an assembly in most parts of the imperialised world. The fight for these demands are above all conducted to strengthen the independence of the working class and its organisations alongside those of the peasants-via demonstrations, strikes, committees of struggle, soviet type organisations, etc.

15. The AIUF in no way implies giving support to so called 'anti-imperialist governments'. Communists give no support to bourgeois governments. We support any serious action of such governments taken against imperialist interests, e.g. the nationalisations or expropriations of imperialist holdings. Communists would support and participate in military actions taken against imperialism i.e. in Nicaragua against the contras

and US advisors, in Argentina against Britain in the Malvinas, fighting in such a struggle for the arming of the workers, for democratically controlled workers militias. Similarly where the political struggle reaches the stage of civil war against a dictatorship, communists might enter a military united front, whenever possible as an independent armed force accepting a common discipline in battle, making agreements under a common discipline. Aiming to strike a united front around common goals of struggle-immediate elections to a constituent assembly, legalisation of trade unions and strikes, etc. We recognise that military blocs are one form of the united front-a form not qualitatively different to united action for political goals, 'war is nothing more than the continuation of politics by other means'. When we call for the military victory of such movements as the FMLN, FSLN, etc, fighting against imperialism, its agents or a dictatorship, normally a slogan raised where the civil war or revolutionary crisis has reached a decisive stage, we are not endorsing the victory of their political programme. Within such a united front we struggle for our programme, to break the workers and peasants from the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois leaderships and enter onto the road of struggle for a workers and peasants' government

16. It is therefore not permissible to give the AIUF in a governmental form since the proletariat cannot share with bourgeois forces the goal of a common government. While we can join a common struggle for the convening of a constituent assembly along with petit-bourgeois and even bourgeois forces, our governmental slogan remain the workers and peasants' government. No bourgeoisie will tolerate a genuine working class government i.e. one that rests upon the armed workers and serves their immediate and historic interests, and the proletariat must under no circumstances support a government of its own exploiters. Any government which claims to be 'above classes' or to represent 'the people as a whole' is a deception. The proletariat can indeed defend or seek to bring about a democratic regime, utilising democratic slogans insofar as these mobilise for a struggle against dictatorship and for the rights of the workers, poor peasants and the oppressed petit--bourgeoisie. But such struggles and slogans should never be erected into a self-contained or self-limiting stage. Soviets must replace the freest parliament, and the workers' dictatorship the democratic republic. From the moment that democratic liberties have been won-de facto as well as de jure - they become an arena for the proletariat's struggle for power.

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