



Theses on Electoral Tactics

Wed, 30/09/1987 - 10:59

How should revolutionaries operate in elections and parliament?

1. In the epoch of progressive capitalism, parliament represented a forum in which the political leaders of the bourgeoisie and its allies debated and decided the policies of their state. In their battles for supremacy against historically reactionary classes and against foreign competitors, the bourgeoisie was often obliged to call for support from the classes beneath them; the majority of the nation composed primarily of peasants and proletarians. Whilst the bourgeoisie mobilised the masses under the banners of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, it ensured that political power was not shared with subordinate classes.

2. The development of the class struggle within capitalist society awakened the oppressed classes to political struggle on their own behalf, often under the slogans of democracy. Thus began the struggle for universal suffrage. That struggle was progressive and, wherever it has been won, communists defend it against reactionary attack. However, where the bourgeoisie were forced to concede the right to vote the role of parliament changed. The real decision making processes retreated out of public view into the intertwined bureaucracies of the state and private capital. Parliament became primarily a democratic facade for the continuing dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.

The counterfeit nature of bourgeois parliamentary democracy has been further reinforced by a variety of devices to limit the representation of the masses. Electoral systems are generally constructed so as to favour the bourgeoisie. This is achieved by the geographical division of parliamentary seats, the 'threshold' of votes below which candidates are eliminated, financial deposits for candidates, the 'simple majority' system of voting and the disenfranchisement of potentially large numbers, for example, immigrant workers. Combinations of these can even result in a minority of electors securing a majority of seats. Communists are opposed to such misrepresentation of the 'popular will' which inevitably weighs most heavily on the working class. We are in favour of a system of proportional representation which allows an accurate expression of the variety of political opinions within the mass of the population.

In general communists argue for, and support democratic reforms of the bourgeois democratic system (proportional representation, abolition of second chambers, of the office of president and of constitutional monarchy, parliamentary control of the executive, adequate payment for deputies, thoroughgoing universal suffrage, etc). Such reforms can never make a parliament a vehicle for the winning of socialism but the experience of bourgeois attempts to oppose 'democratisation' and of the inability of a 'democratised' parliament to challenge the real power of the state 'the 'special bodies of armed men'' can be an important component of the struggle to break the working class from its illusions in bourgeois democracy.

3. Parliamentary democracy was created on the basis of the maturing class struggle of the first capitalist powers. Their further development into imperialist powers in the twentieth century allowed the extraction of super profits from the colonial world. A portion of this vast wealth was used by the imperialist powers to make concessions to their domestic working classes. Even these concessions required a fight on the part of the working class. Carrying that fight into the parliamentary arena was an important means by which the working class became politically organised. However, with the reformist degeneration of the Second International parties which led this work, the fight for concessions came to dominate their political practice. The ability of capital to make concessions and the parliamentarism of their own political leaders reinforced the ideological hold of bourgeois democracy within the metropolitan working classes.

4. Parliamentary democracy, dependent on super profits, could not be extended to the colonial world. Nor could it be

maintained consistently even in the imperialist heartlands. Declining subordinate imperialisms such as Spain and Portugal and the defeated imperialists after the First World War necessarily had to dispense with the luxury of democracy in order to raise the rate of exploitation to compete with their enemies and rivals. Similarly, even in the wealthiest imperialisms, parliaments have recognised their essentially decorative role by passing legislation for their own suspension in time of war or social crisis.

5. Nonetheless, as long as the proletariat and its allies among the oppressed and exploited have illusions in parliaments, communists have to recognise their responsibility to dispel those illusions by developing tactics which will enable the masses, through their own experience, to see the impotent and counterfeit nature of bourgeois democracy. The fundamental principles underpinning parliamentary strategy and tactics were laid down by the Communist International in the revolutionary phase of its first four congresses (1919-22).

6. The parliamentary election, which appears to offer the proletariat and oppressed an opportunity to decide the fate of the nation, is the starting point for communist tactics towards parliaments. Elections generate a higher degree of political activity and interest. This allows communists to address their propaganda to a far wider audience; the communist programme can be presented in the context of widespread discussion of what past governments have done and what future ones ought to do.

The most elementary principle for communists is that it is necessary for the working class to control society. Consequently there can be no circumstances in which communists call for support for parties based in, or representing, the bourgeoisie. Similarly, parties or movements which profess to be 'non-class' (e.g. Green or 'ecological' parties) are, in fact, camouflaged bourgeois parties and no support for their candidates can be given.

Where possible, communists should stand as candidates in order to exploit to the full the platform offered by an election. The manifesto of the party should consist of the communist programme, as applied to the specific time and place, in the form of an action programme. It follows that the elaboration of such a programme is a prerequisite for the standing of communist candidates. In addition the party must have the organisational and personnel resources to mount a consistent campaign amongst the working class.

7. The purpose of a communist election campaign is primarily to win adherents to communism, to organise them and to extend their influence within the working class. The winning of seats in parliament is always subordinated to this end. The campaign itself should stress the necessity of direct working class action to achieve even its most basic objectives and the impossibility of utilising parliament to defeat the bourgeoisie and overthrow their system. Only seats won on this basis represent a victory and can serve as a secure foundation for communist tactics within the parliamentary arena itself. For these reasons communists do not decline to stand for election for fear of 'splitting the working class vote'. The identification and organisation of new recruits to communism is a higher good than the election of a non-communist member of a fraudulent parliament. Nonetheless, it will usually be advisable to stand candidates in the reformists' stronger constituencies since these will normally be areas of working class concentration with greater possibilities of reaching the most class conscious workers.

8. The aim of tactics within parliament is to reveal its true purpose and nature as a talking shop which obscures the operation of the bourgeois state. Communists seek to use parliament as a platform from which to explain their programme of revolution to the widest possible audience. Secondly, communists should seek to expose publicly the intentions and class interests behind the proposals of factions of the ruling class, and its agents, as expressed in parliamentary debate and legislation. Thirdly, communist deputies should attempt to obstruct and delay particularly anti-working class laws and support, or promote, legal reforms in the interests of the working class and/or the oppressed sections of society. Exploitation of parliamentary privilege to attack parliament, to unmask the hypocrisy of bourgeois ideology, to present the case of the exploited and oppressed is the hallmark of communist tactics within parliament.

9. Where, because of size and resources, communists are unable to stand their own candidates but there exist other, non-communist, working class candidates, it may be principled to operate a united front in the form of critical electoral support. Here, the decisive criterion is the relationship of non-communist candidates to the working class and the

oppressed, not the platform of the party. Whilst it is true that non-communists can make promises of pro-working class measures if they are elected and, thereby, win working class support, the requirements of the capitalist system will limit their ability to fulfil such promises, even where they are genuinely made. Communists must seek to warn the working class of this and to exploit the contradictions between reformists and their working class base when such promises are not fulfilled. It is the contradictory nature of such parties which allows the operation of the united front towards them.

This tactic can be applied where such candidates are standing as representatives of organisations organically linked to the working class, for example, reformist parties or trade unions where no such parties exists. By critical support is meant calling for workers to vote for these candidates but on the basis of criticism of their programme. Once again, the communist programme is the basis of communist propaganda posed as demands on the candidates. Not only must the superiority of this programme over that of the reformists be explained but also the record of the reformist party in failing to fulfil even the limited promises made in the past. Such argumentation, however, is unlikely to convince the mass of workers to desert their party. It is necessary also to pose the need for working class action to hold that party to its current promises and to achieve immediate objectives.

In keeping with the principles of united front work, communists march under their own banner of an action programme, sparing neither criticisms of, nor warnings about, the non-communist parties and candidates. They honestly offer to strike together with the non-communists both in the sense of voting for their candidate and of taking joint action in current struggles. In this way the non-communists can be put to the test in practice. In periods of relative class peace this tactic has an important application, even for small propaganda groups, in the training of cadre and the recruitment of new forces on an understanding of the method of the united front.

10. Where established reformist parties exist, and communists are not strong enough to stand their own candidates, such critical support may be repeatedly necessary over a long period. Nonetheless, the tactic should not be allowed to become a routine, automatic endorsement of non-communist candidates. Such repeated use of the tactic must not be allowed to transform it into a strategy. Long use of the tactic must not degenerate into a belief that only the experience of a government of the working class party can break the working class from reformism and that, therefore, the achievement of such government is a strategic necessity for the working class.

The use of the tactic must always be based on a concrete analysis of the current situation. A change of bourgeois government is never the communist solution to any crisis facing the working class. Empty slogans to kick out a particularly unpopular government before the working class is in a position to enforce its own government, based on its own fighting organisations, is a dangerous spreading of illusions in the potential of non-communist parties to protect or extend working class interests. Similarly, demands for a reformist party government on a socialist programme or, what amounts to the same thing, that the left reformists should lead a fight for this, can never be communist slogans. Equally, to argue for working class support for a non-communist party on the grounds that it is a lesser evil than an openly bourgeois party implies the dangerous conclusion that such parties, in government, necessarily offer a form of defence against bourgeois attack. Whilst the election of a bourgeois workers' government might obstruct a planned attack by the bourgeois parties this will only be temporary if the working class does not adopt the action programme of the communists which must be posed as demands on the bourgeois workers' party as the basis for critical support.

11. Where elections are used by the bourgeoisie to quell an explosion of working class militancy, communists must argue for the superiority of direct action to win the demands of struggle. This may require a boycott of the election or critical support of militant, non-communist, representatives of the struggle (strike committees, action councils, etc) against established parties. The boycott tactic can be implemented in situations where participation in electoral campaigns would positively divert the working class from battles it was actively engaged in, for example generalised revolutionary uprisings that threaten to go beyond the bourgeois order or where the masses can clearly perceive the counter-revolutionary intent of parliamentary elections (e.g. Russia 1905).

Abstention, however, is mandatory where there is no candidate that can be supported on a principled basis. Where, for example, there is no working class candidate, even of a reformist party, communists cannot advise the working class to vote for the most sympathetic candidate or for a candidate of a bourgeois party who has the backing of working class

organisations. In such a situation, mobilisation around the election might best be served by campaigning for 'spoiled ballots' in order to register working class opposition to all candidates. In certain circumstances this might be used to gauge the support for the action programme of the communist organisation.

12. Critical electoral support can also be applied to candidates representing oppressed groups such as ethnic minorities. Here the criteria must include not only the relationship of the candidate to the group but also the objectives and the methods of struggle proposed for the oppressed. Where support for these is possible on a principled basis (i.e. they do not conflict with the historic interests of the working class) then the decision to offer a united front to the oppressed, at the expense of the united front with the reformist working class, can also be principled despite the non-proletarian character of the candidate. Such decisions can only be made in the light of specific circumstances such as the political significance of the campaign and the possibility of influencing the supporters of the candidate towards communism.

13. Communists give critical support to non-communist parties on the basis of the relationship of the party to the working class or oppressed. No distinction should be made on the basis of the personality or private opinions of the candidate. We do not give differential support to 'left' as against 'right' candidates.

14. For the same reason we do not give critical support to centrist candidates on the basis that their platform is somewhat better than that of other candidates. By centrists we mean those groups who vacillate between revolutionary and reformist positions. Such vacillation is mortally dangerous in the leadership of the class, particularly in the conditions of social crisis in which centrist formations are often created. Typically, however, the platform of centrism includes elements taken from the communist programme. It can, therefore, appear to be qualitatively better than that of reformism. This is an illusion since the superiority of the communist programme does not lie in the individual desirability of each of its demands but in the cumulative effect of all of them taken together as a strategy for the conquest of power. A party which stands for election on a platform that includes only parts of the strategy of revolution and mixes them with part of the strategy of reform, that is collaboration with the bourgeoisie, is a party that would lead the working class to disaster, to division at the crucial moments of struggle.

However, where centrist candidates represent a genuine break by significant working class forces away from reformism and towards communism then it can be principled to offer electoral support to such 'candidates of struggle'. This applies both to such candidates standing against openly reactionary opponents and against the 'official' candidates of reformist parties. Where centrists do not represent an important force within the working class, even though they may have a degree of electoral support, or where they represent nobody but themselves, we do not give such critical support. Their candidature is a diversion and a dead end for the class and the duty of revolutionaries in such situations is to make the united front with the mass of the working class and not to support the centrists.

15. In terms of their class character Stalinist parties are, like social democratic parties, bourgeois workers' parties. They are not qualitatively better or worse than social democrats. Any decision to extend critical support to Stalinist candidates has to be taken on the basis of their relationship to the working class. In countries where they are no more than a sect no support should be given. In countries where they are the dominant working class party (e.g. Italy) critical support should be given as explained above. Where the working class is roughly equally divided between social democratic and Stalinist parties, communists must assess which is the more closely related to the most highly organised and class conscious elements of the working class and urge critical support for it. This could, of course, result in different recommendations in different regions. Where a clear preference is not possible, revolutionaries may argue for workers to support the reformist party of their choice.

Where the development of the class struggle makes it concretely possible locally or nationally, communists may argue for democratic, accountable and genuinely representative conferences of the workers' organisations to debate and decide the question of which candidates of the workers' parties in the bourgeois elections should be supported, and to place demands on the reformist workers' parties to stand down rival candidates. Propaganda and agitation for such a tactic would enable communists to put to the test those reformist leaders in whom workers' illusions are strongest, by strengthening the reformists position against the capitalist parties, even to the extent of putting them into office.

In all such conferences or 'workers' primaries', communists would argue their own action programme and, where possible, put forward their own candidates for adoption. Where such conferences are genuinely representative and democratic then they may offer a better opportunity for communist propaganda and agitation than would be offered by standing a communist candidate through the usual bourgeois democratic channels.

For this reason, on condition that such conferences are genuinely democratic and representative, communists would withdraw their own candidates from the bourgeois elections if instructed by the conference, and would offer critical support to the 'workers' candidate' identified by the conference.

16. Only consistent communist politics represents a thoroughly independent proletarian policy. All non-communist political currents, consciously or not, represent collaboration with one faction of the bourgeoisie and its state or another. The fundamental demand that communists make on such currents, therefore, is that they Break with the Bourgeoisie! The existence of a popular front, an actual or intended pact with openly bourgeois parties, does not alter communist electoral tactics. Where it is impossible to stand communist candidates we give critical support to the mass based workers' parties within the popular front whilst demanding that they exclude the bourgeois candidates from their lists. The fight to exclude such bourgeois candidates can be used by revolutionaries to illustrate the nature of the popular frontist politics of the bourgeois workers' parties and the need for working class independence organisationally and politically. In the event of the reformist parties refusing to break with the bourgeois candidates we call on workers to vote only for the bourgeois workers' party candidates, even though this might mean effectively a call for 'active abstention', namely a spoiling of ballot papers.

17. Because of their relative poverty, imperialised countries are rarely able to maintain bourgeois democratic parliaments on a consistent basis. However, in keeping with the highly uneven development of such countries and the consequent wide range of differences in the level of development of the classes within them, a wide range of possibilities exists. The most developed exhibit many of the features of the class structure of the metropolitan countries, including parliamentary democracy, whilst the least developed may be under direct colonial control with no political rights granted to their citizens. Communist tactics have to be related to these basic phenomena. Apart from the conjunctural questions that may face such societies a fundamental objective of communist propaganda and agitation is the development of independent working class consciousness and organisation. Even in the most underdeveloped societies safeguarding and extending the independence of the proletariat from alien class forces is a precondition for all tactics.

18. The distinguishing feature of the class struggle in imperialised countries is the continuing significance of the tasks classically associated with the bourgeois revolution, above all national sovereignty and the land question. These national tasks, however, do not detract from the primacy of the proletariat's struggle against capitalism and for socialism. This flows from the global level of development of the productive forces and of the class struggle. The communist answer to the questions of the bourgeois democratic revolution is that the historically progressive elements such as the overthrow of foreign domination, the eradication of pre-capitalist economic and social formations and the involvement of the majority of the people in political life, can only be guaranteed by the creation of a workers' state, in alliance with the oppressed strata of town and country and the expansion of the revolution beyond national frontiers. This will necessitate a struggle against the representatives of capital both foreign and national.

19. Consequently, in the struggle against foreign and national capital, communists do not pose the creation of an 'independent' bourgeois parliament as the salvation of the nation. They argue the strategic alternative of soviet power and soviet democracy amongst the working class and peasantry. However, where widespread illusions in parliamentary democracy exist it would be sterile sectarianism for them to limit themselves to repetition of the advantages of soviets over parliaments. Where no parliament exists, communists relate to democratic illusions by demanding the formation of a sovereign, unicameral constituent assembly and for free elections to it to be held under the control of workers' and peasants' organisations.

Where they can stand for election, communists stand for the creation of a workers' and peasants' government, responsible to, and based upon, the fighting organisations of the working class and peasantry and committed to a

programme of expropriation of the major capitalists and landowners and the arming of the workers and peasants against capitalist counter-revolution. Where communists are unable to stand their own candidates but there exist parties organically linked to the working class (e.g. Social Democratic or Stalinist parties) in whom significant sections of the working class have illusions, then the tactic of critical electoral support could be applied on the basis of the same criteria as outlined above for the imperialist countries. The action programme of the communists would be the basis for criticism of the programmes of the reformists (or centrists) and would be raised as demands on their candidates summed up in the general demand, Break with the Bourgeoisie!

20. Because of the retarded nature of their development and the consequent incomplete class differentiation, the identification of parties with specific social classes will often be ill-defined in imperialised countries. In addition, oppressive regimes may prevent the open formation of political parties and the active involvement of the masses in political life. Under such circumstances it is necessary for communists to operate a range of united front tactics designed to relate to widespread illusions in non-proletarian political forces.

21. Although critical electoral support is a variant of the united front tactic the fact that it involves the question of government sets it apart from other applications of the united front in the imperialised world. Although in the context of, for example, a national liberation struggle, it is theoretically possible to form principled united fronts even with ?national bourgeois? elements for immediate common action against a common enemy, this cannot be extended to the governmental level. At that level there can be no common interest between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and, unlike the bourgeois workers? parties of the imperialist world, such parties are not tied to social forces that might force them to adopt anti-capitalist measures. Critical electoral support for a party representing the bourgeoisie is, therefore, excluded. However, because of their conditions of existence, the petit-bourgeoisie, urban and rural, of the imperialised world can give rise to mass based revolutionary movements.

Although wedded to a bourgeois programme such movements may have to adopt revolutionary methods even for bourgeois objectives (e.g. redistribution of the land or expulsion of a colonial power). It is therefore possible that, in order to relate to such movements, communists might utilise the tactic of critical electoral support for parties organically linked to such petit-bourgeois mobilisations. However, it is to be expected that social crises of the magnitude necessary to generate such petit-bourgeois movements would also ensure the development of proletarian, if non-communist, forces. Clearly it would be the duty of communists to relate to these forces rather than those of the petit-bourgeoisie, if necessary via the tactic of critical electoral support. Communist utilisation of the tactic of critical electoral support with regard to petit-bourgeois movements, therefore, has to be regarded as exceptional. At the same time the tactic of the workers? and peasants? government clearly implies the possibility of alliances with the representatives of such forces after an election.

22. Where repressive regimes have prevented the full development of nationally organised political parties or where reactionary electoral laws prevent small political parties from standing candidates, the proposal for an ?electoral bloc? of different political parties and groupings is likely to be made. The decisive criterion for taking part in such blocs is whether communist candidates will be allowed to make communist propaganda and to criticise other components of the bloc where this is necessary. Without these rights such a bloc is merely a platform for non-communist propaganda and candidates and communists should not enter them. The tactic of critical electoral support for the candidates of the bloc would be a viable alternative where the conditions in thesis 19 are fulfilled.

23. The precise role and powers of presidents vary from state to state but, in general, the office is designed as a counterweight against the popularly elected assembly. The very existence of the office is an indication of the propensity towards Bonapartism inherent in the bourgeois state. As in the case of the ?constitutional monarchy? the office of president is designed to allow parliament to be overruled whenever there is a danger that its popular electoral base, despite all safeguards, might cause it to adopt positions inimical to the interests of the bourgeoisie and their state. The presidency, therefore, stands in contradiction to the parliamentary system inasmuch as the latter is any kind of expression of the popular will. In the context of the formation of a parliamentary system, therefore, in addition to arguing for a revolutionary constituent assembly, communists argue against the creation of a presidential republic.

Nevertheless, where this battle has been lost and the office of the president has become an established part of the state system communists need to relate to illusions in the office in a manner similar to that with regard to parliament. The particular role assigned to the office of president does not alter this. As in parliamentary elections, the most effective method for doing this is by standing a communist candidate for the office on the basis of an action programme directed to the subordination of the office of president to the organisations of struggle of the organised working class. Where the standing of such a candidate is impossible, critical support for other candidates representing organic links with the organised working class can be extended. Necessarily this will involve demands for the subordination of the president to the elected assembly and the abrogation of all Bonapartist powers in addition to the demands of the action programme upon which critical support is extended to any non-communist candidate.

**Text as amended and adopted by MRCI delegates
London July 1986 and Frankfurt November 1986**

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/theses-electoral-tactics>