

Theses on the united front

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Our complete theses on the united front and how revolutionaries use the tactic to win support and leadership within workers struggles.

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Principles of the united front

1.1 The united front is based on a series of tactical principles that govern the relations between the revolutionary vanguard and other organisations of the exploited and the oppressed in the struggle against capitalism, imperialism and all forms of reaction. These have various spheres of application which fall into two broad categories; the workers united front whose purpose is to achieve class unity and independence in a concrete struggles against the bourgeoisie, and the alliance or bloc with non-proletarian oppressed classes against reaction, especially in the present epoch against imperialism and its agents. The united front should be distinguished from all episodic co-incidental actions where no agreement on a common immediate goal, or co-ordinated tactics is involved. The united front is based upon a military metaphor and indicates a willingness to combine fighting fronts, without merging regiments or confusing banners, for a delimited objective and the defeat of a common enemy.

1.2 The strategic goal of the revolutionary party is the establishment of a world communist society. The only way to achieve this is by means of proletarian revolution; that is, the seizure of state power by workers' and peasants' councils and militias and parties. For this an independent Leninist-Trotskyist revolutionary party is an absolutely indispensable necessity. Only such a party can embody full class independence from the bourgeoisie and lead the proletariat in the struggle to establish its own dictatorship. But to arrive at this point we have to transform revolutionary nuclei into mass parties which have won the confidence of the broadest layers of the exploited masses. Yet today the great majority of the workers in the world support non-revolutionary and even counter-revolutionary organisations. Revolutionaries need to expose the nature of these organisations.

1.3 Propaganda alone is insufficient to carry out this task. It is necessary to demonstrate in practice that the reformist or centrist led organisations cannot adequately defend or fight for workers' interests. The revolutionary party has to deploy a range of tactics which prove to the masses in the class struggle itself that it is the only consistent class party. The party in its turn must learn how to lead actual mass struggles, to demonstrate its capacity as an alternative leadership. In this process it must show both its independent initiative and its ability to loyally co-ordinate its forces with other mass organisations of the working class.

1.4 The united front is a tactic in the class struggle which seeks to establish the broadest possible fighting unity of the exploited and oppressed masses despite their political differentiation. The purpose of this unity is to repulse the attacks of the bosses and bourgeois governments and to secure better economic, social and political conditions for the working class and its allies in such a way that brings nearer the goal of overthrowing capitalism. In this sense, the united front arises in the first place from the needs of the class

struggle. For this very reason the revolutionaries do not simply respond to calls for common action against the class enemy but are always the first to initiate the call.

1.5 The main consequence of a correct united front policy is the exposure of the limitations of reformism, anarchism, syndicalism, centrism and various bourgeois and petit-bourgeois ideologies and programmes within the working class and the eventual replacement of all vacillating and inconsistent leaderships with a revolutionary communist one. At every stage it should strengthen the revolutionary organisation through increased recruitment and deepened roots in the mass organisations.

1.6 As a result of these two considerations united front tactics presuppose the maintenance of an independently organised revolutionary organisation based on a transitional programme for the seizure of state power and the overthrow of capitalism. This party must participate as an independent detachment, not dissolve itself, in the united front. On the other, the necessity of the united front presupposes the existence of broad non-revolutionary masses, both unorganised and organised by other political forces.

1.7 The united front is then at its heart about establishing the correct ongoing relation between the revolutionary party and the working class. Since this relationship is permanent and yet changing and since the field of operation of the united front, the class struggle, is likewise permanent, then the united front is correctly described as a ubiquitous tactic; that is, a tactic that is repeatedly being deployed in one form and in one arena or another.

1.8 The united front cannot be regarded as an uninterrupted series of actions with the same partner up to and including the seizure of power. Its repeated use constitutes only a series of tactics within the framework of the overall strategy of the proletarian vanguard party. This strategy necessarily includes the independent actions of the party. In widely different forms the united front is constantly being struck and broken. It must never be turned into a systematic subordination of the proletarian vanguard to any limited platform of demands which are acceptable to various non-revolutionary leaders of mass organisations. This would be to relegate the revolutionary programme itself to passive propaganda and to restrict agitation solely to immediate or at best transitional demands.

1.9 The united front is a differentiated unity. It is common action for clearly limited and prescribed goals; it also entails sharpest criticism of the united front partners. Without the first, the capitalist attacks cannot be repelled or new gains won; without the second the gains cannot be maintained nor the revolution advanced. All mistakes in the application of the united front begin when this differentiated unity is replaced by a formal identity between the tasks of the revolutionary organisation and the class.

1.10 Ultra-leftism invariably begins when the revolutionary programme is advanced in counterposition to the united front platform. For the ultra-left, the united front is posed as an ultimatum to deliberately court its rejection by reformist and centrist leaders in the vain belief that this exposes them. Such 'exposure' in reality has a purely literary character. The reformist leaders are not exposed because they fail to carry out revolutionary tactics or strategy but because they fail to fight for the immediate interests of the masses. The sectarian avoids being measured on the practical terrain of the class struggle, fearing that they will succumb to opportunist temptations.

1.11 On the other hand, the opportunist starts not from the platform of struggle or even a single demand dictated by the objective needs of the class struggle, but rather by what the present consciousness of the masses is deemed to be or, worse, what their leaders can be expected to accept. On the contrary, the scope of the proposals put forward by revolutionaries for a united front, while likely to be less than the 'full programme' is also likely to be considerably in advance of the timid proposals of the reformist leaders and even ahead of the general consciousness of the masses. The aim of the united front must be to link the

present consciousness of the masses (and especially its advanced sections) to the urgent tasks of the day as dictated by the nature of the enemy's attacks.

1.12 Because the united front is not a strategy, there is no such thing as a united front programme that goes from today's struggles to the seizure of power. The revolutionary organisation advances those parts of its programme that appear necessary to unite broader forces in a practical fight. Having determined the nature of the attack and the balance of class forces, the revolutionary organisation advances concrete slogans and demands that, taken together, mount to a fighting unity to repel the specific attack or secure new advance. The demands must be specific, precise and avoid all extraneous and artificial demands or ideological dressing that do not bear upon the achievement of the common goal.

1.13 The character of the demands to be fought for in the united front does not fall into any schematic categorisation. Any concrete united front proposal could consist of only one type of demand; e.g. immediate economic demands, democratic demands, transitional demands. It can be offered or struck on a platform of several demands which are tied together as a combined series of actions to meet a particular crisis or it can even consist of a single demand. United fronts can thus be a single action, a strike, an armed action, or it can be a longer campaign of actions. Valid criticism of a united front proposal can only be that it excluded an essential demand for an action that it would be possible to win the masses to and expose their leaders if it was refused. The absence of many revolutionary demands from a united front platform cannot be taken as a valid criticism; indeed, the presence of such demands (for instance soviets) in a non-revolutionary situation is a sure sign of passive propagandism, scholasticism and sectarianism. On the other hand, in conditions of mass upsurge in the class struggle it becomes indispensable to fight for the soviet-type bodies as the best expression of the united front.

1.14 The demands must be associated with clear and precise methods of struggle (e.g. demonstrations, strikes, defence squads, armed militias) and forms of organisation (e.g. strike committees, mobilisation committee, soviets). The united front can thus vary in form and durability according to the nature of the attack or the action against it. Committees which exist to co-ordinate a series of diverse or repeated actions aimed at achieving the objective are united front organisations; in this sense the united front is more than the action itself (e.g. demo) but embraces its preparation and post festum evaluation.

1.15 The united front is open to all those who share the demands and are prepared to fight in a disciplined way for them without renouncing their freedom of criticism of the front partners. The united front can be struck with anyone (?the devil himself?) who is prepared to fight for the aims; the principled character of the united front cannot be determined by reference to the bloc partners but only by whether the goal and methods of struggle are principled. If revolutionaries are able to utilise splits within the enemy camp and to bring reformists or open bourgeois forces into contradiction with their own programme then this is principled.

1.16 Under freedom of criticism we recognise both criticism of the vacillations of the bloc partners in carrying out the objectives of the united front and their broader political failings. Therefore, there should be no common propaganda, which can only be made at the cost of leaving aside important, and in the event decisive, differences between revolution and reformism. Common publications associated with the united front (e.g. strike committee bulletins, mobilising leaflets for demos etc) must be designed to agitate and propagandise for the united front demands and objectives only. The relationship between common action and criticism cannot be laid down according to a formulae. We reserve the right to criticise our partners before during and after the common action. When, and in what form, we exercise that right depends on concrete judgement made in the given circumstances. But that criticism should be made is obligatory.

1.17 The united front must be addressed to the rank and file and the leadership. We reject the idea of the

united front from below only as a self-defeating and ultra-left trap. If the workers could be attracted to abandon their leaders by such a direct and unilateral appeal there would be no need for the united front at all. The purpose of directing the united front appeal at the leaders is to draw them into action and through this experience, rather than declamatory exposures, prove the masses that their limitations are fatal ones. The united front in the great majority of cases will remain at the stage of a proposal, rather than an agreement formally struck with reformist leaders. In these conditions it remains at the level of an agitational and popular propaganda campaign aimed at the rank and file of the reformist organisations.

1.18 Even where some success is achieved in breaking off radicalised workers the united front retains its full validity and force for those who remain behind. The united front from below may sometimes be necessary where the leaders have refused to act in concert with the revolutionaries. Here it is necessary to combine denunciations of the leaders with proposals for action aimed at the rank and file or individuals under revolutionary leadership. But even here part of the tactic is to generate pressure upon the leaders to act which, if successful, can only have the effect of drawing even more layers into action.

1.19 Breaking the united front can be as important as making it. Where the united front has served its purpose and the goal achieved or lost the united front needs to be redefined or broken and the lessons drawn for the forces involved. Where the united front is maintained only as diplomatic or literary exercise and entails no obligation to act on bloc partners; where the bloc partners are sabotaging or undermining the aims of the united front by non-implementation or compromises with the class enemy; where the united front partners refuse to take the extension of the united front seriously to other mass forces but restrict the bloc to sect like proportions; all these circumstances may necessitate the breaking of the united front. But at the same time it must attempt as far as possible to continue the united struggle with the rank and file leadership, establishing its own leadership and winning to its ranks the best elements from the non-revolutionary organisations.

1.20 Observing the foregoing considerations is essential if the united front is to be principled. But this does not guarantee either that it will be principled or successful. A concrete analysis of a concrete situation alone can yield what is the correct basis for a united front proposal. Leadership and experience is required, accumulated over years while intervening in the class struggle, in order to determine what united front demands are permissible and necessary and to what forces these demands should be addressed.

The Workers? United Front

2.1 The objective of the workers? united front is to achieve the maximum unity in action for the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. At its heart is the assertion of class independence. Its guiding principle is the challenge addressed by the revolutionary organisation to the reformist and centrist leaders of serious or mass workers organisations ?Break with the bourgeoisie!?. Unity of the workers means a split with the bourgeoisie, its state and its parties. The principles of the workers? united front are those stated above applied to united proletarian class struggle, defensive or offensive. Thus it can be applied to both the most limited and defensive actions or action and to an offensive against the entire bourgeois order. In both cases it involves a challenge to the reformist and centrist leaders, in pre-revolutionary and revolutionary situations it can be developed into the challenge to these misleaders ?Break with the bourgeoisie - take the road of struggle for a workers government!?

2.2 Workers? united front principles find a wide sphere of application in the trade unions. Indeed the trade unions are themselves in an important sense ?united fronts? for the defence of the workers? economic social and political interests within and against capitalism. As united fronts, which must by their very nature embrace the broadest possible strata of the wage earners, communists are against sticking party labels on the unions, against subordinating them mechanically to party leadership. The unions are and must remain

organisationally autonomous bodies. Only thus can they be 'schools for socialism' for the less class conscious workers. But this principled attitude has nothing in common with the attempt to keep the unions apolitical. The revolutionary party openly and honestly fights for leadership by gaining the confidence of the union membership.

2.3 On the road to winning leadership in the unions the revolutionary nucleus will have to form temporary alliances, united fronts, with non-revolutionary but militant and democratic forces with the object of committing the unions to class struggle and establishing ever more democratic control by the rank and file over the bureaucracy, ultimately eliminating it as an agency of the bosses altogether. Such united fronts may be only episodic, related to important conjunctural battles. But it is also necessary to build a more systematic campaign for the democratisation of the unions and the triumph of more militant and indeed revolutionary tactics. For such a Rank and File Movement it is not possible to stipulate in advance and for all circumstances a fixed platform of demands.

2.4 The revolutionary party must fight for its own programme-for the transformation of the trade unions into instruments of the revolution (alongside factory councils soviets, workers' militia). But since such a rank and file movement retains the character of a united front, even where the revolutionary party is a major influence and initiator what its specific action programme will be will depend on the objective conditions of the class struggle, the level and line of development of the consciousness of the most militant sectors of the masses, the political character of their present leadership and the independent strength of the revolutionary vanguard. The aim of the party is to win the militant rank and file for its programme but on the road to this it will undoubtedly have to accept and even itself put forward more limited platforms of immediate action. In doing so it must retain not only the freedom to criticise this basis for its limitations but also its partners in the united front. The party's trade union policy must never become identical with the actions of a united front. The united front must never become confused with the party's trade union fractions which comprise its members and all those who accept the party's entire programme for the trade unions and act under its discipline.

2.5 In the unions, where the urge for unity is strongest, revolutionaries must not only respect this but be the foremost battlers for it, emphasising unity in struggle against the bosses and unity against, not with, the bourgeoisie. The trade union bureaucracy and the reformist leaders emphasise unity in inaction, in surrender, and unity with the employers and the bourgeoisie. This is the unity of the graveyard. On the road to fighting unity it is necessary for sections of the class, the vanguard, to take the initiative. Revolutionaries must also point out that a united workers' struggle for victory will necessitate 'disunity' with the bureaucracy when it sells out or betrays the struggle. The necessary disunity with the traitorous leaders may even lead to a split in the trade unions themselves. Communists are not in favour of splitting the unions, and certainly do not seek to do so in order to achieve political dominance over small, ineffective 'red unions'. But on the other hand neither communists nor militant reformist, centrist or non-party workers should accept catastrophic betrayals, a regime of terror and expulsions from the unions where substantial sections of the rank and file stand behind them. In such conditions they do not flinch from 'breaking the united front' of the reformist unions themselves, creating in effect new unions.

2.6 But the conditions for this must be (a) the willingness, demonstrated in mass struggle of substantial sectors of the old union to follow such a new union (b) the clear explanation to the entire class that the responsibility for the split and the disunity rests with the reformist bureaucrats and their betrayal and police regime against militant workers (c) the eagerness of the new union to form united fronts with the others in every workers' struggle (d) the willingness of the revolutionary-led unions to re-unite the unions on the basis of internal workers democracy and the active defence of workers interests (e) a policy for the new unions of transcending narrow craft or purely economic concerns but to take up the broader political

aspects of the class struggle, to organise the non-unionised strata, the super-exploited and the nationally, racially, or sexually oppressed.

2.7 In summation, the communist united front policy in the unions should be the struggle to qualitatively transform the unions. To turn them from acting as safety valves for capitalism, ruled by a bureaucracy that is a police agency of the bosses and their state and whose membership is dominated by, or largely restricted to, the labour aristocracy, into organisations embracing the class conscious majority of the proletariat. Thus the unions can assist in developing and transforming isolated, sectional and even generalised economic class consciousness (class consciousness in its embryonic or larval form) into political and indeed revolutionary class consciousness. To bring this about requires the intervention and the building of a revolutionary party, organising the vanguard fighters and that this party utilizes various forms of the united front in the unions to transform them into schools for socialist consciousness and instruments of the revolutionary class struggle.

2.8 When general strikes occur we should demand the constitution of rank and file strike committees in which the masses can control their own struggle and avoid many bureaucratic manoeuvres and betrayals. The communists try to develop in times of severe class struggle more democratic, combative and broader mass organizations. These are the workers' councils. In these we fight for representatives to be elected and recallable by mass assemblies, for their extension and centralisation, their arming and winning of the soldiers.

2.9 The workers' united front cannot be restricted to the trade unions as the Bordigists sought to do. It applies with equal force and at time of heightened class struggle with even greater force to the political parties that claim to be workers parties and which actually organise substantial sections of the proletariat. Its purpose is to drag the reformist leaders from their union offices, their parliamentary chambers their banquets and secret meetings with the class enemy into the streets, onto the picket lines, indeed onto the barricades in revolutionary conditions. The fact that these leaders may be proven lackeys of the bourgeoisie, that they tyrannise over their own rank and file, even that they have murdered the best representatives of the revolutionary vanguard, can be no argument against proposing the united front to these leaders. What is decisive is that these traitors still retain, if not the confidence, then the control over large masses of the proletariat and conversely that the revolutionary party has not yet won the confidence or the organised leadership of these masses.

2.10 The necessary class unity of the proletariat cannot thus be achieved ?without the leaders? or ?from below alone?. To attempt to do so is to leap over the very problem the united front is designed to address. Thus it is necessary to propose practical courses of action to these leaders. The united front tactic passes through various stages. First there is the call for the united front. It is a challenge to the reformist leaders to abandon their customary class collaboration and fight the class enemy. In most cases this proposal will be rejected. The united front does not get beyond an agitational exposure of the reformist leaders unwillingness or incapacity to fight. In conditions of heightened struggle and the revolutionary party grows in influence then the reformist leaders may feel obliged to negotiate the formation of a united front. The process of striking an agreement with the reformists must be done as as openly as possible, telling the masses exactly the scope of the action agreed, its limits due to the reformists' hesitation or cowardice, and the need to watch and control their leaders. The revolutionary party will itself propose practical measures for the most effective tactics, organisation and democratic accountability. The overall purpose is to, if possible, prevent the betrayal of the reformists or, should it occur, to minimise the disruptive effect on the struggle and to inflict the maximum discredit on these leaders, rallying the greatest number of their followers to the revolutionary leadership.

2.11 The workers' united front is counterposed to all blocs with the parties or individual representatives of the bourgeoisie. The proletariat does not refuse the support of sympathetic individuals or indeed organised forces from other classes for its own actions. It might for example even work with bourgeois forces within racially or nationally oppressed sectors against state repression for full and equal rights, or against fascist attacks. Such common actions however do not necessitate 'reserving a place' for the Jewish, or black, bourgeoisie in the workers' anti-fascist united front for example. Still less should it subordinate or curtail its own demands, immediate or historic, to winning uncertain allies from the petit bourgeoisie or maverick bourgeois notables. In the imperialist countries the bourgeois parties are incapable of any systematic progressive actions and revolutionaries must oppose their participation in common fronts with the workers' organisations. They reject any support for a government of the reformist workers' parties with the parties of the bourgeoisie, a 'Left' coalition or Popular Front. If an organised pseudo-united front or popular front is formed between the mass workers' organisations and bourgeois parties revolutionaries must seek to develop tactics to expel the bourgeois parties by demonstrating to the workers that the latter are incapable of mass struggle, that they obstruct and betray such struggles, that the reformist leaders constantly use the need to retain their support as a pretext to avoid vital struggles.

2.12 The workers' united front tactic also extends to the demand on the reformist parties to break with the bourgeoisie and struggle for a workers' government. In moments of acute political crisis this can become the major slogan of the day. What is a real workers' government? One that takes decisive actions to disarm the bourgeoisie and arm the workers, to aid the workers in the struggle to seize their key vantage points of capitalist power; the banks, the big monopolies. Clearly such measures cannot be carried through on the terrain of electoral and parliamentary politics. To reformist workers who have illusions that they can, we say; go on elect your parties to office, force them to attempt such measures if you can, but you must prepare and mobilise your unions and your parties for the inevitable bourgeois declaration of civil war if your leaders take any serious measures which threaten private property. We will critically support your parties' election victory and defend them against bourgeois attack. To centrist workers who believe that a combination of a parliamentary victory and independent mass mobilisation is sufficient we say; it is suicidal to tie the workers' mass actions to electoral timetables, to respecting majorities and minorities and to fail to attack the real core of the state the special bodies of armed men out of constitutional or legal scruples. The 'workers government' that does not win the soldiers and their weapons out of the hands of the bourgeois officer corps, the high command etc, that does not arm a workers militia and disarm and dissolve the police force, will have its throat cut.

The United Front and Fighting Propaganda groups

3.1 Can blocs between small organisations which have not themselves developed beyond the level of propaganda societies really be regarded as 'workers' united fronts'? Yes, but only to the extent that they are aimed at mobilising wider forces for action and that they place as a top priority the winning of the mass workers' organisations to the given objects of struggle. Of course, it is likely that it will be the base units or Left and militant elements of the mass organisations that will be won over. They must always be aware that these small scale combinations are only a tiny embryo of a united front and should not be counterposed to continued demands and calls on the leaders of the mass organisations to unite in class action. There are temptations, both sectarian and opportunist involved in creating miniature imitations of the united front. The opportunist consequence is the weakening of the revolutionary group's independent voice and action. The sectarian danger is the counterposition of these weak 'united fronts' to a real struggle within the mass reformist or centrist mass organisations even if this should be for more limited, or even episodic unity in action.

3.2. Trotsky denounced the idea of 'revolutionary' united fronts between propaganda groups whether in the form of permanently allied organisations, joint-newspapers, or electoral blocs, if the latter involved any

hiding or downplaying of the independent line of the revolutionary organisation, any granting of revolutionary credentials to centrist bloc partners, any common programmes or platforms which are not the full revolutionary programme. Propaganda group existence means that the life of these organisations is largely devoted to propaganda tasks combined with participation in the mass struggles of the class as a very weak minority, unable to make a practical challenge for leadership. It is an enormous temptation in these conditions to form long lasting or semi-permanent blocs, fronts, or campaigns with centrist organisations or reformist individuals or the non-aligned, non-party elements. The temptation is also a product of relative isolation from the proletarian masses, a feeling of despair at this and a consequent desire to leap over the obstacles by opportunist concessions. The temptation arises to shed the 'ballast' of the revolutionary programme and the abandoning of the need to patiently explain it to the vanguard.

3.3 It seems easier to seek replacement vehicles for the tiny group's own mass propaganda and agitation, its own election campaigns and for its own independent interventions in strikes, demonstrations, anti-fascist mobilisations etc. Insensibly this develops into a view that a large proportion of the revolutionary group's political activity, especially in the sphere of immediate, limited demands, can be, and indeed should be, conducted in common with centrists, militant trade unionists, etc. Insensibly therefore the 'rest' of the programme comes to be regarded as long term, abstract and any emphasis upon it regarded as passive propagandist, and even sectarian. By slipping into this method the clear independent revolutionary viewpoint is not addressed to the masses in the here and now. Rather, by having recourse to propaganda blocs with centrist groups, miscalled united fronts, the lowest common denominator triumphs. The most right wing organisation of the propaganda bloc will either have a veto, or it will be normal for a 'compromise' between revolutionary positions and reformist or centrist ones to be accepted as the price for maintaining the bloc. It is no excuse that the revolutionaries put out in addition to the centrist propaganda a smaller amount of their own propaganda if at the same time they put out a much larger circulation of centrist propaganda.

3.4 In no spheres are the temptations greater and the results of succumbing greater than in the trade unions and in the electoral sphere. where the revolutionary group which is still at a propaganda stage feels most cruelly it's tiny size and powerlessness in the face of big tasks. In the unions there will be a natural pressure to form a block with any oppositional elements against the common enemy, the ruling fraction of the union bureaucracy whether it be Stalinist, Social Democratic or bourgeois or petit bourgeois nationalist. We can critically support and unite with such oppositionists when they stand for a more militant class struggle position or a fight for greater workers' democracy. But such temporary blocs must be operated on strict united front principles; including no defence of our bloc partners political and organisational errors.

3.5 Again there should be avoidance of any suggestion of an undifferentiated unity with centrist or reformist allies. The anarcho-syndicalists or 'pure' trade unionists appeal for just such a programmeless, amorphous bloc under the claim that all that is necessary is to unite the rank-and-file against the leaders. As Trotsky pointed out, these anarchists in fact conceal their political organisations behind trade union facades. But the rank and file, i.e. the masses of union members, do not always and spontaneously see the right course and the trade union needs leaders (and indeed officials). Our aim is to win leadership of the unions, openly and honestly as undisguised revolutionaries whilst submitting our leadership to democratic control, recallability, etc. We should not confuse the need to organise the rank and file in an anti-bureaucratic movement with the revolutionary organisation's entire work in the trade unions. The former is a legitimate sphere of various forms of the united front. The latter is task of the party's trade union fraction(s). Any confusion or fusing of the two will mean the centrist dulling of the sword of revolutionary principles and revolutionary tactics. Even when it comes to putting forward common candidates or a common slate for workplace committees or national union elections it should be clear what the limits of any common platform are and that the centrist candidates are being put to the test not given

an unconditional or uncritical recommendation by the revolutionaries. Normally this can only be firmly established by making a clear distinction between the revolutionary fraction within the union which consists of the organisation and the supporters of its union or workplace action programme.

3.6 In the sphere of elections to municipal councils or parliamentary assemblies, because of the general strategic questions posed to revolutionary representatives, candidates must retain the freedom to issue and indeed must stand upon a full revolutionary position focussed to the immediate situation (an action programme). However, in certain circumstances undemocratic laws or regulations may preclude small revolutionary groups standing unless they combine with centrist or even reformist groups or parties. Wherever possible complete separation of revolutionary platforms should be maintained. Where some sort of common planks are necessary then revolutionaries must not exaggerate their satisfactory scope in meeting the workers needs, i.e. no rhetorical exaggeration, 'communist?', 'socialist?', 'revolutionary?', 'red' lists, etc. They must put forward their own full and distinct revolutionary platform on which they will act if elected. They must fully criticise their block partners even where calling for a vote for them. They must make it clear that they will follow the discipline of their party not that of a 'united front' on all important issues whilst holding themselves accountable to their working class electors. Again the overall principle is never to allow the temporary bloc for a limited action to obstruct or obscure the overall profile of the revolutionary organisation and its platform.

The United Front in the degenerated workers' states

4.1 In the degenerated workers' states, Trotskyists have always been willing to act in a united front with the Stalinist bureaucracy for the military defence of these states against attacks by capitalist and imperialist powers or against a counter-revolutionary uprising. This possibility did not rest upon any strategic or inevitable commitment by this bureaucracy to defend the planned property relations (quite the reverse), but rather the contingent tactical necessity that this bureaucracy might have (and did have in 1940-5 and in other workers' states thereafter) to defend the planned property relations in defending itself and its privileges. The Trotskyists' defencism vis a vis the workers' state was strategic, the united front with the Stalinists was tactical. It was obligatory to offer this united front as long as the workers states were under threat and would have been dependent for its actual formation on the Stalinists cessation of their bloody repression against the Trotskyists. For the duration of the operation of this defencist united front, the Trotskyists would have temporarily suspended or rather subordinated their activity for the political revolution.

4.2 During the political-revolutionary crises which marked the last forty years of Stalinism; it was necessary in the course of these eruptions to undertake various united fronts with anti-bureaucratic forces who had or developed substantial influence over the masses but whose programme was not a revolutionary communist one. The forum for these united fronts would have been the workers' councils, the factory councils and the independent trade unions which were formed. The political forces which led these revolts ranged from right-Stalinist and Social Democratic ones to those of a religious and/or nationalist character. All had more or less disguised programmes of concessions to, or restoration of, capitalism. All of them had illusions in the applicability of bourgeois democratic rights. As long as these forces organised and led a large majority, or even the politically active minority of the working class, it was necessary to seek united action with them to break the political dictatorship of the bureaucracy and establish democratic rights for all not directly or immediately seeking the overthrow of the planned property relations.

4.3 During the period of the final agony of Stalinism, which opened in 1989 and is not yet complete¹, and during the period when counter-revolutionary bourgeois governments established themselves, a more complex, swiftly changing and episodic application of united front tactics has become necessary. It was, and is, necessary to defend the democratic rights of the workers, peasants and the intelligentsia against

either Stalinist restoration of a bureaucratic dictatorship or against bonapartist restorationist regimes. No strategic bloc for this entire period is possible. It was and is possible to form temporary limited united fronts with both the reformist/radical wing of the bureaucracy and the conservative/hardline wing in defence of the democratic rights of the workers and/or the historic gains if either of these factions are forced to defend them for their own reactionary reasons. The workers' united front can be applied with full force to all the trade unions, official or independent, and to those parties which claim to be 'workers' or 'socialist' parties, which have a working class mass base, but which are in reality restorationist and serve the international bourgeoisie. More limited common actions, conducted on united front principles but emphasising the conjunctural character of these blocks and the open and fundamental class antagonism the workers should demonstrate to them, is possible with other 'democratic' or 'national liberation' forces, providing their immediate aims and objectives are justified and acceptable to the proletarian vanguard. Thus it was permissible and necessary to seek a defensive military block with the forces led by Yeltsin during the Stalinist hardliners' putsch of 18-20 August 1991. It would have been principled and necessary to form a military defensive block with the nationalists against a Soviet army takeover in the Baltic States in 1990/91.

The united front and blocs with non-proletarian forces

5.1 The revolutionary proletariat in its struggle with capitalism puts itself at the head of all the exploited and the oppressed, pledging to end their political oppression as soon as it takes power and to use the construction of a planned economy and the building of socialism and communism to abolish the last remnants of social oppression. These oppressed nations races and classes cannot be simply identified in their entirety with the proletariat. Nationally, racially or sexually oppressed proletarians have an integral part in both the revolutionary party and the united fronts of the labour movement. In addition special party or united front campaigns may be necessary to promote this integration. But where large numbers from other classes are involved and where their privileged and even exploiting classes exercise political leadership over the working class and plebeian classes, the proletariat and its revolutionary vanguard may have to establish alliances, common actions, defensive and offensive military blocs with them according to the principles of the united front.

5.2 How important such class alliances are will depend on the relative size and class consciousness of the proletariat. The fundamental principles involved are that the proletariat must first and foremost establish its class independence and unity and then its hegemony over its allies. In addition the strategic necessity for an alliance, with the poor peasantry and the urban poor, or the racially oppressed, for example, does not ipso facto dictate a strategic bloc with any specific organisation of the oppressed. Blocs, alliances or fully formed united fronts must obey united front principles. Where the proletariat is the predominant class in society and the workers movement is at least organisationally distinct, such blocs will be episodic at best. In the imperialist countries the bourgeois strata of the oppressed are the main force for compromise and surrender of the interests of the oppressed. The proletariat must seek to break their hegemony, disintegrate their 'popular fronts' - replacing them with working class-led movements of a united front character as soon as possible under the leadership of the revolutionary party. However, it may be necessary to organise common actions with, and even participate in, existing popular front campaigns with the aim of breaking bourgeois hegemony.

5.3 In the semi-colonial world, especially where the proletariat is a minority of the population and where other plebeian classes predominate the proletariat faces the dual task of establishing its class independence whilst winning a majority of the peasantry, the urban poor the impoverished petit bourgeoisie etc to its side in decisive revolutionary crises. The soviet form will in these conditions be the highest expression of a united front between the proletariat and the exploited and oppressed masses. On the road to this however various co-ordinated common actions, alliances, and united fronts will be necessary. The starting point for these will be the social and economic needs of the masses and their

political and democratic rights. The foundation stone of all such struggles will be the united front of the workers? organisations to which all other alliances, no matter how important take a secondary and auxiliary character.

The anti-imperialist united front

6.1 The Fourth Congress of the Communist International (1922) launched a new version of the united front applicable to underdeveloped Asian countries. In these regions there were no massive independent working class organisations, there huge unfulfilled minimum democratic tasks (e.g. anti-feudal agrarian reform, national independence, ending colonial status, the absence of a republic, not even an 8 hour day) and the fighting movements were headed by revolutionary nationalist movements lead by sections of the local bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie. The Anti Imperialist United Front (AIUF) was developed with the aim of pressing these nationalists to organise and mobilise the toilers, to break with imperialism, and to create unions, and workers' committees, workers' councils and militias. The conditions for such an anti-imperialist united front that the communists put to the revolutionary nationalists are that they should respect the rights of the workers organizations and democratic rights of the exploited and communists, they should fight against imperialism with revolutionary methods and that also that they should defend the soviet workers' state against imperialism.

6.2 The anti-imperialist united front is thus one specific form of the united front in the semi-colonial world. The Communist International in 1920-22 outlined the tactics of communists in relation to oppressed sections of the bourgeoisie and petit-bourgeoisie in semi-colonial and colonial countries. The same principles apply to this variant of the united front as with the workers' united front; namely, to bring about maximum unity within the plebian masses in the fight for progressive goals and to overthrow influence of non-revolutionary ideas and leaderships over the proletarian movement in the process. But certain features flow out of semi-colonial conditions that give this united front additional aspects.

6.3 In the early part of the imperialist epoch imperialism sought to obstruct the development of native capitalism by supporting the backward semi-feudal classes on the land. Here, the working class had an interest in the fullest development of capitalism (and thereby itself) over pre-capitalist forms and of the widest possible operation of bourgeois democratic rights with which to develop its own organisations of struggle. Continued imperialist domination inevitably, however, promoted industrial development in the imperialised countries but in a stunted and lopsided form. The imperialist banks and monopolies dominate their economies, extracting superprofits. The IMF, World Bank are among the imperialist agencies that impose restrictions on semi-colonial economies. The near impossibility of ensuring this continued regime of super-exploitation through democratic forms means that imperialism has always sought to maintain itself in alliance with the most reactionary sections tied to imperialism-the landed oligarchy, the military. The demand for ?independent? economic development, for relief from the burden of debt, for state industrialisation, protective barriers, land reform and sovereign political institutions reflects the need of sections of the bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie who suffer most from the straight-jacket of imperialist domination. This gives rise to the possibility and need for a united front between workers and non proletarian classes in society.

6.4 In the first place, the AIUF is with the peasantry and the urban petit bourgeois. The goals of this united front are agrarian revolution, literacy and education reforms, the adoption of social and labour legislation, the extension of the franchise. But episodic clashes can occur between sections of the national bourgeoisie and imperialism. Since the petit-bourgeoisie and the infant proletarian movements can be led or heavily influenced by national bourgeois classes then the united front is possible between the working class and sections of the national bourgeoisie, on two conditions. First, that they are in practice actually fighting against imperialism and its national agents; secondly, that the bourgeoisie does not obstruct

revolutionary methods of struggle and places no restrictions on communists' independent activity aimed at organising the workers. This freedom of operation is essential since the bourgeoisie is only a vacillating ally and could not pursue the fight against imperialism to the end. Even those sections of the national bourgeoisie that clash with imperialism are economically tied to it. More importantly, the national bourgeoisie fear the revolutionary mobilisation of the masses against imperialism since this threatens their own class rule as well as that of the imperialists. Therefore, no place is reserved in the united front for the bourgeoisie, whereas revolutionaries actively seek the participation of the plebeian and poorer sectors of the petit bourgeoisie. At no time must the working class sacrifice its struggle for independent class demands against native capitalism and the national bourgeoisie in order to secure a united front with the national bourgeoisie. This would be a popular front.

6.5 In the post-second world war period, the scope for united fronts with non-proletarian forces has been modified further by the changing nature of imperialist domination and the changes within the semi-colonies themselves. Today, there is an absence of significant semi feudal elements on the land; the struggle for national independence and self-determination rarely takes place as a struggle against imperialist occupation. Moreover, imperialism dominates the semi-colonies through alliances with national, neo-liberal bourgeoisies rather than semi-feudal, landed interests. The scope for a section of bourgeoisie to collide with imperialism is much reduced due to changes in the nature of interests of national bourgeoisies; access to political patronage informs the struggle of the national bourgeoisie against bonapartism and militarism. Therefore, the likelihood of a section of the bourgeoisie that actually fights against imperialism or for democratic rights is less. That is why in many countries in the twentieth century the leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle has often fallen to the petit bourgeoisie.

6.6 The AIUF develops on the terrain of minimum or democratic demands. These can be defensive in periods of retreat or defeat where the masses are emerging from long periods of dictatorship, when the demands may centre on rights of free speech, release of all political prisoners. The AIUF can also centre on demands for a constituent assembly. But it is not possible to give the AIUF a governmental form. The fight by communists to win the workers, poor peasants and urban petit bourgeoisie to the socialist revolution must by its progress break up the AIUF. The fight for a workers' and peasants' government must be a government where the peasants have broken from their bourgeois and petit bourgeois leaders and been won to the dictatorship of the proletariat. Even while we can join in a common struggle for the convening of a constituent assembly along with bourgeois forces, our slogan remains for a workers' and peasants' government, one based on the armed councils of the masses - something no bourgeoisie can tolerate.

6.7 The AIUF in no way implies giving support to so-called 'anti-imperialist governments'. Communists can in no circumstances give support to a bourgeois government, to a government of their own exploiters. Any government that claims to be 'above classes' or which represents 'the people as a whole' is a deception. We support any serious action of such governments taken against imperialism (e.g. the nationalisation or expropriation of Multi-national corporate holdings). The working class can lend its support to the fight for democratic rights insofar as they help the workers to organise and develop their revolutionary struggle. But such struggles and slogans should never be erected into a self-contained or self-limiting stage. Soviets must replace the freest parliaments and the workers' dictatorship, the democratic republic.

6.8 Communists would support and participate in military actions taken against imperialism (e.g. in Nicaragua against the contras, 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 civil war reaches the stage of civil war against a dictatorship, communists may enter a military united front, whenever

possible as an independent armed force, accepting a common discipline in battle, making agreements under a common discipline. We recognise that military united fronts are one form of the united front - a form not qualitatively different from united action for political goals. When we call for the military victory of such movements that fight imperialism or its agents, we are not endorsing the victory of their political programme. Within such a united front we struggle for our programme and fight to break the workers and poor peasants from the bourgeoisie and enter onto the road of the workers' and peasants' government.

Endnotes

1. These theses were produced in the early 90s when the Stalinist states were still in the process of turmoil following the fall of the Berlin wall.

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