

The United Front

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The effective use of tactics to defeat reformism requires a firm grasp of the strategy of which these tactics are a component part. The series of related tactics that have become known as the united front must not be allowed to usurp their subordinate function.

Any theory or practice which assigns to the united front, either in one of its forms, or via series of united fronts, the role of an unbroken road to socialism is, ipso facto, unprincipled and can only lead to the systematic and progressive abandonment of the revolutionary programme. With iron necessity it leads to the negation of the independent and conscious role of the working class in its own emancipation.

It progressively downgrades and renounces in practice the role of a revolutionary party. It turns the united front from a weapon against reformism into a pretext for ideological surrender to, and organisational liquidation into, reformism. The road to power for the working class does not lie along an unbroken plane of trade union or electoral action, no matter how long any particular national labour movement may have been confined to such action.

Breaks in continuity, catastrophes as well as triumphs, the loss of previously acquired gains, the creation of new forms of organisation and tactics, leaps forward in consciousness all characterise the history of the international labour movement.

It is the task of revolutionaries to prepare programmatically, tactically and organisationally for these events. The creative role of the working class itself and of other oppressed classes and strata is the bedrock of Marxist tactics. The experience of the British, French and German labour movements culminating in the Paris Commune was the irreplaceable creative impetus to the foundation of scientific socialism.

On the basis of a critical analysis of this experience Marx and Engels came to elaborate the principles and strategy for working class power, the role of trade unions and the need for a working class political party. Lenin and Trotsky likewise developed the programme on the basis of the Russian proletariat's use of the mass strike and the soviet; they did not do this by worshipping "spontaneity".

They did not attempt to present or defend what was unconscious, backward looking or confused in all of these great examples of proletarian creativity. By critical analysis they understood the essential forward dynamic of these creations. Above all they understood the vital role of the revolutionary vanguard party. They understood it as the formulator of strategy and tactics, as alternative contender for leadership in the class's everyday battles and necessarily, as the general staff and cadre of the decisive majority of the proletariat, in the seizure of political power.

The need for a scientific programme-re-elaborated whenever necessary to meet fundamental changes, but defended resolutely against impressionistic revision-is the very core of the party, its vital significance.

On this basis the party guides its own work, and strives to guide the proletariat, by developing concrete

perspectives and utilising and combining tactics in a principled manner.

Those tactics are principled which in any given situation help advance the class towards its historic goals- either in a general or in a partial way. That is, tactics which develop its class consciousness and organisation. Those tactics are unprincipled (or opportunist) which for the sake of supposed momentary gains or for the good of a section of the working class, sacrifice fundamental interests or injure the unity and interests of the class as a whole-nationally and internationally.

Strategy and tactics are not fought for merely by literary exposition, by propaganda. Ideas do not conquer by their own correctness. They must be given organised expression. They conquer only in the hands of an organised cadre, a potential leadership for the working class. This alternative leadership cannot triumph all at once but partially, unevenly at first.

Only finally does this struggle become one of conflict between mass parties, between sections of the proletariat grouped under the banners of reform or revolution. When decisive questions are posed to the proletariat objectively by war, social crisis and revolution, the lack of a revolutionary cadre or its weakness, its lack of roots (seasoned militants) in the proletariat creates a ?crisis of leadership? This crisis presents enormous possibilities to revolutionaries armed with the right programme and tactics.

The operator of these tactics is the organisation of revolutionaries. This organisation has to pass through a series of stages of growth from an ideological nucleus via propaganda circles, to a party embracing the vanguard of the working class. Its basis at all stages is a process of ideological and programmatic debate concluding in decisions for common action.

Out of this, as the grouping fuses with the struggles of workers and draws into its ranks the advanced workers there emerges workers? democracy and disciplined action-democratic centralism. In all of its stages of growth, and through all tactical or formal compromises, the Leninist principle of organisation, of party building, cannot be compromised or diluted in favour of reformist or centrist alternatives.

Tactics cannot supplant strategy. If so, the united front first disguises, then dissolves or leads to the degeneration of, the revolutionary organisation itself, leading to the triumph of reformism. Reformism has all too many such victories to its credit. There is, however, no alternative to the battleground of the class struggle and therefore no avoiding of the specific ?battles? of the united front.

Bordigist abstention-a passive propagandist rejection of tactical compromises including the united front-is no solution whatsoever to the ?dangers? inherent in all real life conflict. The working class, whether the sectarian wills it or not, faces the imperative need to struggle on immediate issues, ranging from sectional struggles to those which pose objectively the question of political power in society.

The working class cannot and will not wait in passivity until it has the ?right? leadership. United front tactics allow an immediate response to the attacks of the class enemy. They allow a frontal conflict with the common foe but they necessarily include a flanking political struggle against the treacherous reformist leaders. This necessity is dictated both by the immediate tactical needs of the struggle directly in hand, and by the historic interests of the working class. They are inextricably linked to the principled utilisation of immediate demands (economic and political) and transitional demands.

Thereby an alternative action programme and an alternative leadership can be posed to answer the repeated crises caused by the reformist leadership. Because communist tactics are the product of the unity of the scientific analysis of society and of revolutionary practice within the class struggle they are themselves subject to historical development, to re-appraisal, to re-elaboration. This is no less true of the

Marxist analysis of reformism and the development of tactics to combat it.

The Marxist struggle against reformism did not commence with the crystallisation of the term 'united front' in the Leninist Comintern. Marxism was born in struggle against a reformism, that of the degenerating utopian socialists or hybridisers of democratic and 'socialist' ideologies in the 1840s-1860s. Marx and Engels' struggle against Pierre Joseph Proudhon and his followers, against Louis Blanc's 'social democrats' grouped around the paper *La Reforme*, against the influence of Ferdinand Lassalle in the infant German social democratic movement all accumulated much of the programmatic capital used by Lenin, Luxemburg and others in the pre-1914 struggle against the growing power of opportunism and revisionism.

In 1848/49 Marx and Engels practised various forms of 'united front'. Ryazanov justly remarks with regard to the First International and its 'Inaugural Address' that, 'Marx and Engels gave a classical example of 'united front' tactics.' The founders of scientific socialism considered, correctly enough, that the 'reformism' that they were combating had its origins in the petit-bourgeois and artisan milieu out of which the modern proletariat and its organisations were emerging.

Certainly the reactionary utopias of Proudhon and Bakunin represented a petit-bourgeois 'backwardness' bound to yield ground and disappear before the advance of scientific socialism. Marx and Engels' critical optimism appeared well founded given the achievements of both the First and Second Internationals in winning the world labour movement to Marxism.

Only in Britain did Marx and Engels encounter what we can call 'modern reformism', a proletariat which had fallen under bourgeois influence. This feat they put down to British dominance of the world market, the 'buying' of sections of the British workers' leaders by the bourgeoisie, the existence of an aristocratic stratum of skilled workers whose unions dominated the labour movement and who were liberal-radical in their political outlook.

They further emphasised the havoc wrought by the hostility between Irish immigrants and British workers estimating that the political nullity of the latter stemmed from their collusion in the national oppression of Ireland. Their prognosis was that when Britain's unchallenged exploitation of the whole world was broken by the fast developing capitalism of the USA and Germany and when the great unorganised mass of the proletariat began to stir 'then there will be socialism again in England.'

Whilst Marx and Engels' analysis of the roots of the British workers' failure to create an independent political movement provided an important methodological weapon for Lenin after 1914, the decade or so preceding this watershed date saw the falsification of the optimistic prognosis that reformism was a fading phenomenon linked to a dying class.

The resolute resistance by the German trade union leaders to the tactics of the mass strike, the growth of revisionism in the Social Democratic Party of Germany, as well as the party's rapid bureaucratisation after 1905, all phenomena repeated to a greater or lesser extent throughout the parties of the Second International (1889-1914), indicated that the roots of the problem had to be examined anew.

Lenin and Luxemburg, from 1899 to 1914 fought revisionism and opportunism vigorously, castigating it as theoretically and practically a bourgeois trend within the workers' movement. Neither, however, understood its roots or its full strength until 1914. The catastrophe came in 1914 when all the major parties of the Second International, with the exception of the Russians, voted war credits in defiance of resolutions passed by successive congresses of the Second International, most notably those of Zurich (1893), Stuttgart (1907) and Basle (1913) and supported a class peace to ensure the victory of their own

imperialist "fatherlands".

Not only was the proletariat deprived at one blow of the mass organisations of class struggle that two generations had built up, but the full magnitude of the cancerous growth of reformist bureaucratism was starkly revealed. Also revealed in its full magnitude was the epochal change which had occurred in capitalism-its development into its final stage, imperialism. Lenin's analysis of this change was not simply "economic". The new "epoch of wars and revolutions" had produced a new basis for bourgeois labour politics.

According to Lenin's analysis the new imperialist capitalism was able, on the basis of super profits, to make concessions to the upper strata of the working class, the aristocracy of labour. This stratum became thereby conservatised, adopting a petit-bourgeois way of life. With the aid of trade unions, and through the reforms won by the use of the municipal and parliamentary franchise, this stratum felt it had "settled its social question" without recourse to revolutionary struggle.

Consequently it became the social basis of a powerful conservative bureaucracy within the unions and within the mass parties, co-operatives and the other workers' organisations. This process of conservatisation and bureaucratisation had proceeded apace from the 1890s until 1914. It had occurred in labour movements dominated by Marxism and those where it was weak, though in the former it was disguised behind a formal orthodox phraseology. August 1914 posed the either/or for this new reformism. Now it had to "dare to appear what it in fact was", as Eduard Bernstein had put it.

Only in the conditions of imperialist war this was not, as the father of revisionism had hoped, "a democratic party of social reform", but a party of social chauvinism or social imperialism. Thus it was revealed to the revolutionary current represented by Lenin, Luxemburg and Liebknecht, not as the opportunist right wing of the proletarian army, but as the left wing of the forces of the bourgeoisie.

These bourgeois agents however, held the bulk of the workers' organisations in a vice-like grip-a rigid bureaucratic structure that stifled proletarian democracy and policed the workers' organisations, persecuting and atomising the revolutionary vanguard. Obviously Marxist tactics had to be developed to overcome this enormous setback. They had to be based on mobilising the working masses to defeat the reformist bureaucrats, to set the majority against the tiny minority, the base against the top.

These tactics were not "worked out" in isolation from struggle by superwise theoreticians. They were developed in the crucible of one great victorious revolution and one tragic defeat for the proletariat. On the basis of the Russian and German experiences the Leninist Comintern codified these into the tactics of the united front.

Between February and October 1917, the working class of Russia, through its soviets, held de facto power in the major cities. Order Number One of the Petrograd Soviet instructed workers and soldiers to carry out only those orders of the bourgeois Provisional Government which the Soviet had itself endorsed. However, the majority of workers in this period accepted the leadership of the reformist Mensheviks.

The latter had no desire to wield the power of the soviets to destroy the already tottering bourgeois state. Instead they used the soviets to shore up the tottering Provisional Government. The Bolsheviks, recognising that the bourgeois state could only be overthrown by the conscious decision of the majority of the working class to take power for themselves, developed tactics which could win the workers to that strategy and oust the Mensheviks.

This meant that, rather than baldly counterposing their programme-revolution-to the masses' illusions that

their needs could be satisfied without a further proletarian revolution they had to demonstrate in common action with the Menshevik-led workers and the SR-led peasantry that their immediate demands for peace, bread and land necessitated a seizure of power from the bourgeoisie.

That the Bolsheviks were able to do this was not due, in the last analysis, to either the weakness of reformism in backward Russia, or to the undoubted genius of Lenin and Trotsky. In the course of their development, the Bolsheviks had learnt to avoid the twin pit-falls of opportunism and sectarianism. They resisted the temptation to pose their programme against the limited consciousness of the workers or to liquidate their programme in the interest of accommodating to that limited consciousness.

This was not achieved without bitter struggles within the ranks of the revolutionary movement, the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP). In 1905, it was necessary to overcome a sectarian attitude to the first St Petersburg Soviet in the Bolshevik faction and an opportunist avoidance of the question of armed insurrection which predominated among the Mensheviks. In 1906, the position of boycotting the Duma had to be posed against opportunist electoral tactics, whilst in 1907 boycottism, against a background of working class defeat, itself became a sectarian error.

In 1914, the ability of the Bolsheviks to stand firm against social patriotism on the question of the war marked them out as the major grouping of revolutionaries committed in all circumstances to intransigent opposition to any degree of class collaboration. Yet, while holding firm to their opposition to the war, the Bolsheviks did not cease to be active within the working class even when the majority of the class supported the war. This remained the case when, after the February revolution, that war was being waged by the workers' own leaders.

This principled flexibility was well summed up by Lenin when he wrote, a propos of the British SDF's hostility to the Labour Party: "When objective conditions prevail which retard the growth of the political consciousness and class independence of the proletarian masses, one must be able patiently and persistently to work hand in hand with them, making no concessions to them in principles, but not refraining from carrying on activities right in the heart of the proletarian masses."

It was because tactics that would lead the class to revolution could only be derived from a clear programmatic conception of the revolution that the Bolsheviks were only able to apply principled tactics after their rejection, in the form of the April Theses, of the incorrect programmatic conception of the democratic dictatorship of the Proletariat and Peasantry and their de facto adoption of the strategy of the Permanent Revolution.

It was only after the adoption of the April Theses that the opportunist support of the Provisional Government and its military policy, adopted by some elements within the Bolshevik Party, was ended and replaced by total opposition to the war as long as it was an imperialist war in defence of the Russian bourgeois state.

At the same time, however, it was also from this point that the Bolsheviks were able to develop tactics which could break the working class from their existing leadership. Recognising that the Mensheviks' loyalty was ultimately to the bourgeoisie, the Bolsheviks sought to expose the incompatibility of this with the needs and aspirations of their working class followers.

The fusion of the programmatic and tactical advances made by the Bolsheviks in 1917 can be summed up in their two pivotal slogans which were directed both at the workers themselves and at their leaders, "Break with the Bourgeoisie!" "All Power to the Soviets!" Within these formulae is encapsulated the concretisation of all that the communists had by then learnt of the interlinked problems of programme,

strategy and tactics. The demand for revolution is linked inextricably to the actual activity and living organisations of the working class.

They themselves must take the power. This is proved repeatedly to the workers by the misery and death rampant in their ranks as a direct result of their leaders' policies. Those leaders must, therefore, prove in practice whose side they are on in the class struggle. If they will not break their coalition with the bourgeoisie then the workers' organisations must break with them.

At the same time the Bolsheviks did not wait passively for the passage of time to prove them right. That might have only been proven negatively, by the defeat of the working class at the hands of their own leaders.

On the contrary, the Bolsheviks demanded that the Mensheviks break their coalition immediately, not just on the central question of who ruled, but over the immediate life and death questions of the working class: soviets' control of food distribution, workers' inspection of the war industries and the profits being made from them, nationalisation under workers' control of the banks, immediate introduction of land reform to break the power of the landowners and bring the peasant masses to the side of the proletariat and, above all, the immediate cessation of the war.

By arguing within the soviets that, although these were the measures the working class needed the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries in a bloc with the bourgeois Cadets, would never carry them out and that the soviets themselves should undertake them, the Bolsheviks not only exposed the true character of the Mensheviks and destroyed their social base but also, simultaneously, developed the ability of the soviets to take all power into their own hands.

The method of the Bolsheviks in 1917 can be summed up as follows: firstly, an open commitment to, and call for, the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeois state by the working class; secondly, the raising of those demands which linked the immediate experience and needs of the working class to the need for revolution, thirdly, complete tactical flexibility in relation to the mass of reformist-led workers, including activity within, and defence of, their organisations; fourthly, open characterisation of, and warnings against, the reformist leaders' treachery coupled with a commitment to defend them at any time should they themselves come under attack from the open forces of the bourgeoisie.

During the revolutionary upsurge that began with the Russian revolution and lasted until 1921, the principal task of the Bolsheviks with regard to the international proletariat lay in the formation of the Comintern. In forging this as a world party it was necessary to draw a clear line of demarcation between revolutionaries on the one side and reformists and centrists on the other.

The crucial points of differentiation centred on questions of strategy, for the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeois state or for its defence, for soviet power or parliamentary democracy, for proletarian internationalism or defence of the fatherland, for defence of Soviet Russia or war against it. Under the desperate conditions prevailing in most of the metropolitan countries the working class moved to the left and, in order to keep their places in the leadership, reformists and centrists moved left also, at least verbally. In this situation it was imperative for the small communist forces existing in those countries to concentrate on exposing the real intentions of such leaders, to denounce them and their politics. The organisational conclusion to be drawn from this was the creation of separate communist parties or the transformation of existing socialist parties into communist parties by the purging of all traces of reformist and centrist politics.

The Comintern was successful in creating communist parties in this manner. It split the centrist USPD in

Germany at the Halle Congress in 1920 winning its majority. As a result the membership of the KPD rose from tens of thousands to half a million. In France, in the same year, the SFIO split at the Tours Congress to create the French Communist Party. The following year, the Italian PSI split. This time a minority broke away to form the PCI.

The Comintern's insistence on programmatic homogeneity, exemplified in the famous "Twenty One Conditions for membership of the CI", was essential not only to make clear the lines of division on theoretical questions between the reformists and the revolutionaries but because it also conformed to the needs of the class struggle itself.

As the bourgeoisie made concessions to the working class in order to gain time and consolidate their forces, it was essential for communists to argue against the reformists' claims that such concessions were sufficient to meet the needs of the working class and removed the need for revolution. Typically the concessions centred on bringing into positions of "power" precisely the reformist representatives of the working class who then demanded of the workers they defend the "new" regime, give it time to prove its worth and not risk the loss of existing gains by pressing further demands on society.

Communists had to counterpose to this the mobilisation of the working class against such traitors and the state that they defended. As the Habsburg and Hohenzollern monarchies collapsed in Vienna and Berlin, workers' councils held de facto power, workers' militia patrolled the streets. Further evidence of the revolutionary possibilities, and the viability of revolution, was provided by the Soviet Republics of Bavaria and Hungary, short lived as they were.

However, outside of Russia, the bourgeoisie survived, the communist parties were established but remained a minority in the working class. In 1921, the Communist International at its Third Congress recognised that the initial post-war revolutionary upsurge was over, that the bourgeoisie were now on the offensive to claw back the concessions they had been forced to make. Nor were the reformists, who had negotiated and policed those concessions, safe from the bourgeoisie's attack.

Increasingly they too were thrown aside, their usefulness now outlived. In developing tactics to meet this new situation the Comintern drew not only on the Russian experience of 1917 but, crucially, on that of Germany in 1919 and 1920. As in Russia, when the imperial monarchy fell in November 1918, power passed to the workers' councils. As in Russia these councils were politically dominated by the reformist leaders, the SPD under Noske and Scheidemann. Unlike Russia, the reformists had extremely strong roots in the organisations and traditions of the German working class. As a result the working class had been educated and trained in the spirit of reformist practice which, in reality, was confined to the struggle for the "minimum programme".

That is, it struggled for those reforms which, whilst they were undoubtedly in the interest of the working class, did not challenge the fundamental framework of the bourgeois order. The reformists in Germany were able to use their leading position in the workers' councils to apparently implement this minimum programme. In fact it was the revolutionary actions of the workers which swept away the Kaiser and the German Empire.

It was the counter-revolutionary actions of the SPD which restored the reactionary general staff and bureaucracy to power. Thereby the soviets were first neutered, then destroyed. The result was the shaky edifice of the Weimar Republic.

The revolutionaries in Germany, the Spartacusbund, and later the KPD, were numerically very weak and politically inexperienced by comparison with the Bolsheviks. Almost as soon as they had created an

independent party in December 1919, they were provoked into an ill-prepared conflict with the bourgeois state. Noske and Scheidemann used that state to isolate and liquidate the leadership of the KPD, first in Berlin and then in Bavaria.

The KPD, now without its most tested cadres, was forced into illegality. By March 1920, emboldened by their successes against the proletarian vanguard the extreme right of the German bourgeoisie attempted to claw back the concessions they had made by attacking the Weimar Republic's government. The Freikorps, an irregular military force supported by the majority of the General Staff, marched on Berlin to overthrow the government and install a military government fronted by Wilhelm Kapp.

Then the government appealed to the Reichswehr to defend the Republic. The army, under von Seeckt, refused to act and the government fled to Dresden and thence to Stuttgart. Recognising that it was not only communist workers but also themselves that were now under attack, the leaders of the German trade unions, under Karl Legien, were forced to mobilise the only force that could now defend them. They called an immediate General Strike in defence of the Republic.

The vast majority of the working class, still committed to the political programme of their reformist leaders, heeded the call. Germany was completely strikebound within hours. Once again armed workers patrolled the capital. As the Freikorps retreated, workers' councils were formed in the major cities, seizing the arsenals and securing the major buildings and railroads against possible counter-revolution.

The leadership of the KPD, which had lost its finest representatives in the counter-revolution, proved unable to effect the sharp tactical turn necessitated by this dramatic change in circumstances. They declared that the proletariat had no interest in the outcome of a class struggle which was in essence within the forces of counter-revolution.

They declared that the workers should not "lift a finger to defend the democratic republic". Nonetheless, the dynamic of the struggle across Germany forged unity between Communists, Independents and the rank and file of the SPD. In Saxony, for example, the workers' council consisted of deputies from all three parties.

The Berlin centre of the KPD were obliged to reverse their sectarian position within 48 hours. However, when Legien, scared both by the resurgence of the reactionary forces and the prospect of workers' power, proposed that the SPD, USPD and trade unions form a workers' government, the KPD refused to offer it any support, even against reaction.

The SPD, still more concerned to preserve its alliance with the "progressive" bourgeoisie also opposed the call and formed instead a coalition. Thereafter, it once again utilised the Reichswehr to demobilise the very workers' councils and disarm the militias that had saved its skin. The response of the KPD to the Kapp Putsch was sectarian.

By counterposing revolution as an ultimatum, rather than allying with the mass of workers to defend the democratic gains they had made, they lost the opportunity of developing out of the struggle the political consciousness and independent organisations which could have held the SPD to account and prevented the disarming of the councils.

However, being only a small party, they did not carry the responsibility for the aftermath of the coup in the minds of the workers. Rather, it was the USPD that carried the odium and which, in October 1920, lost hundreds of thousands of members to the KPD. Recognising that the party now had a mass base and real social power, the leadership of the KPD, now under Paul Levi, attempted to use that power to force the

SPD and USPD leaders to fight against the rapidly developing capitalist offensive on wages and jobs. In January 1921, the KPD addressed an 'Open Letter' to all the workers' organisations in which they proposed the formation of a united front to fight on these questions. This proposal was supported by Lenin but, having being rejected by the reformists and centrists, the tactic of demanding united action was dropped in favour of a misguided attempt at independent revolutionary action, the March Action of 1921.

In attempting to provoke the working class into revolution the KPD met with complete disaster. The membership was halved and the rightist forces in Germany were greatly strengthened as they capitalised on the isolation of the communists and the hostility, or at best indifference, of the mass of the workers.

The essence of the change of circumstances in Germany which allowed for the possibility of joint action by the communists alongside the reformist workers, was that the reformist leaders had succeeded in keeping the majority of the working class in check during the revolutionary period of 1918-19.

They did this by pointing to the gains the working class had made without revolution. A considerable part of their traditional programme had been implemented. The monarchy was gone, universal suffrage had been granted, factory councils were legitimised and the workers' party itself was now in government, albeit in coalition. These gains were sufficient, argued the reformists. They could be used to enforce a socialised economy which would keep the capitalists under strict control.

However, when the revolutionary tide had receded, the bourgeoisie necessarily returned to the offensive to recoup the power they had ceded in the workplace and in society at large. In attacking the concessions made to the working class they were also obliged to attack those who had negotiated them.

Even the reformist consciousness of the mass of the German workers dictated that they should fight to defend the Weimar Republic. Thus, the workers took to the streets during the Kapp Putsch with their reformist illusions still, essentially, intact. Prior to this, when the reformist leaders were in the van of the counter-revolution, communists could only attempt to turn the reformist workers directly against their own leaders, demand that they make common cause with the communists on the communists' terms. Now with the reformist workers and their leaders under attack, it was possible to propose united action to both leadership and rank and file.

In all its essentials the same development took place internationally during and after 1921. The difficulty that the KPD had met with in trying to re-orient itself to the new situation and to develop flexible tactics to take advantage of it was repeated within the ranks of the Comintern.

It was an analysis of the change of period and the need for a change of tactics that the Third Congress concentrated on. In its Theses on Tactics, the Third Congress recognised that the most important task of the day was to 'win predominating influence over the majority of the working class and to bring its decisive strata into the struggle.

For, despite the objectively revolutionary situation, political and economic. . . the majority of the workers are not yet under communist influence; this is particularly true of those countries where finance capital is very powerful and where consequently large strata of the workers are corrupted by imperialism (e.g. England and America)".

The need to take part in the struggles of the workers was particularly emphasised in the section of the resolution entitled 'Partial Struggles and Partial Demands': 'Communist parties can develop only in struggle. Even the smallest communist parties should not restrict themselves to mere propaganda and agitation.

They must form the spearhead of all proletarian mass organisations, showing the backward vacillating masses, by putting forward practical proposals for struggle, by urging on the struggle for all the daily needs of the proletariat, how the struggle should be waged, and thus exposing to the masses the treacherous character of all non-communist parties. Only by placing themselves at the head of the practical struggles of the proletariat, only by promoting these struggles, can they really win over large masses of the proletariat to the fight for the dictatorship".

Finally, in its concluding manifesto, the Congress returned to the centrality of direct involvement alongside the mass of workers for their immediate needs: "The traitors to the proletariat, the agents of the bourgeoisie, will be beaten not by theoretical arguments about democracy and dictatorship, but on the question of bread, of wages and homes for the workers".

The work of the Third Congress, with its guiding slogan of "To the Masses!", was only the beginning of the task of elaborating the necessary new tactics. In December 1921, the Executive Committee of the CI (ECCI) developed the logic inherent in the theses of the Third Congress. If it was necessary to take part in, and give a lead to, partial and immediate struggles then it was necessary also to propose such struggles.

As long as the majority of workers still held faith in their reformist organisations and leaders it was necessary to propose that they co-operate in such immediate struggles alongside the communists. This was the first conscious and planned application of the tactic of the united front.

Many sections of the Comintern found the greatest difficulty in accepting the new tactical policy. Particularly for those who had only very recently broken from the ranks of the reformist parties it appeared contradictory to now demand that the leaders of those parties co-operate with the communists. For many this appeared likely to "spread illusions" in those leaders.

In his argument with the French CP, who were particularly opposed to the policy, Trotsky gave the clearest possible explanation of the essentials of the tactic, its origins in the exigencies of immediate day to day struggle, the necessity of putting the reformist leaders on the spot by demanding of them united action: "It is perfectly self-evident that the class life of the proletariat is not suspended during this period preparatory to the revolution.

Clashes with industrialists, with the bourgeoisie, with state power, on the initiative of one side or the other, run their due course. In these clashes-insofar as they involve the vital interests of the entire working class, or its majority, or this or that section-the working masses sense the need of unity in action, of unity in resisting the onslaught of capitalism or unity in taking the offensive against it.

Any party which mechanically counterposes it self to this need of the working class for unity in action will unflinchingly be condemned in the minds of the workers. . . . Does the united front extend only to the working masses or does it also include the opportunist leaders? The very posing of this question is a product of misunderstanding.

If we were able simply to unite the working masses around our own banner or around our practical immediate slogans, and skip over reformist organisations, whether party or trade union, that would of course be the best thing in the world. But then the very question of the united front would not exist in its present form. The question arises from this, that certain very important sections of the working class belong to reformist organisations or support them.

Their present experience is still insufficient to enable them to break with the reformist organisations and join us. It may be precisely after engaging-in those mass activities which are on the order of the day that a

major change will take place in this connection. That is just what we are striving for. But that is not how matters stand at present. . . . The Communists, as has been said, must not oppose such (i.e. united) actions but on the contrary must also assume the initiative for them, precisely for the reason that the greater is the mass drawn into the movement, the higher its self confidence rises, all the more self-confident will be that mass movement and all the more resolutely will it be capable of marching forward, however modest may be the initial slogans of struggle.

And this means that the growth of the mass aspects of the movement tends to radicalise it, and creates much more favourable conditions for the slogans, methods of struggle, and, in general, the leading role of the Communist Party. . . ."

The Comintern, however, saw clearly the dangers that the UF held as a tactic. It could become a cover for a peaceful non-aggression pact with the reformist leaders. The latter of course would always demand the cessation of "destructive" criticism. This communists can never concede, since it is to accept that immediate struggles should take place within a blinkered opportunist perspective.

Thus the ECCI demanded the "absolute independence of every CP which enters into an agreement with the parties of the Second and two and a half Internationals, its complete freedom to put forward its own views and to criticise the opponents of communism. While accepting a basis for action, communists must retain the unconditional right and the possibility of expressing their opinion of the policy of all working class organisations without exception, not only before and after action has been taken, but also if necessary during its course. In no circumstances can these rights be surrendered. While supporting the slogan of the greatest possible unity of all workers' organisations in every practical action against the capitalist front, communists in no circumstances desist from putting forward their views, which are the only consistent expression of the defence of working class interests as a whole."

Furthermore the united front was not primarily an attempt at an agreement with reformist leaders but an appeal to the masses standing behind them. It was to be operated from above and below: "What is the united front and what should it be? The united front is not and should not be merely a fraternisation of party leaders. The united front will not be created by agreements with those "socialists" who until recently were members of bourgeois governments.

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 remain indifferently aside, and in defiance of the leaders and against the leaders if they sabotage the workers united front. Where the reformists resist the formation of a united front the communists should not just sit back and resort to literary, polemical denunciations but: "Build the united front locally too, without waiting for the permission of the leaders of the Second International."

If united fronts are directed at limited actions, to maintain a bloc with the reformist leaders during and after a betrayal in action, is to become complicit in it. Trotsky stigmatised the Russian trade unions for doing just this during the British General Strike by remaining with the TUC in the Anglo-Russian Committee: "Temporary agreements may be made with the reformists whenever they make a step forward. But to maintain a bloc with them when, frightened by the development of a movement, they commit treason, is equivalent to criminal toleration of traitors and a veiling of betrayal."

Both the Leninist Comintern in the early 1920s, and Trotsky throughout the 1920s and 1930s, stressed the limited, clear and specific nature of the demands and slogans around which the united front should be offered. Writing in the 1920s, Trotsky pointed out that, "however limited the slogans, anything which develops the mass character of the movement embarrasses the reformists whose beloved arena is the

parliamentary tribune, the trade union bureaus, the arbitration boards, the ministerial antechambers."

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".

The united front is a tactic for achieving the maximum unity in action for limited, immediate or defensive aims at a time when the forces of the proletariat are divided and the reformists and centrists still lead important sections, or an outright majority, of the class. It is, at the same time, a tactic for exposing the reformist leaders as betrayers of even the immediate goals of the workers, a tactic designed to win the masses to communist leadership.

Trotsky clarified the question of the united front and how it related, within the totality of revolutionary strategy, to other tactics: "The unity of the proletariat, as a universal slogan, is a myth. The proletariat is not homogeneous. The split begins with the political awakening of the proletariat, and constitutes the mechanics of its growth. Only under the conditions of a ripened social crisis, when it is fused with the seizure of power as an immediate task, can the vanguard of the proletariat, provided with a correct policy, rally around itself the overwhelming majority of its class.

But the rise to this revolutionary peak is accomplished on the steps of successive splits. It was not Lenin who invented the policy of the united front; like the split within the proletariat, it is imposed by the dialectics of the class struggle. No successes would be possible without temporary agreements, for the sake of fulfilling immediate tasks, among various sections organisations or groups of the proletariat . . . (these struggles) demand a united front ad hoc even if it does not always take the form of one . . . At a certain level, the struggle for unity of action is converted from an elementary fact into a tactical task. The simple formula of the united front solves nothing...The tactical application of the united front is subordinated, in every period, to a definite strategic conception. In preparing the revolutionary unification of the workers, without and against reformism, a long and patient experience in applying the united front with the reformists is necessary; always of course, from the point of view of the final revolutionary goal."

How then do strategy and tactics relate to each other? Trotsky delineated the matter clearly in Strategy and Tactics in the Imperialist Epoch: "By the conception of tactics is understood the system of measures that serves a single current task or a single branch of the class struggle.

Revolutionary strategy on the contrary embraces a combined series of actions which by their association, consistency and growth must lead the proletariat to the conquest of power.? Seen from this angle any single united front or type of united front is a tactic, part of the overall strategy which includes splits, ruptures and eventually the unification of the majority of the class behind the revolutionary vanguard in the struggle for the seizure of power.

In this struggle the reformist leaders are most likely to be found in the camp of the counter-revolution and at best will be neutralised. Trotsky time and again stressed that no form of the united front could form a road to communism: "The policy of the united front with reformists is obligatory, but it is of necessity limited to partial tasks, especially to defensive struggles. There can be no thought of making the socialist revolution in a united front with reformist organisations."

The form of the united front proposed by the Comintern in the early 1920s was the united front of the workers' parties and unions. This was possible both because of the economic and political circumstances

of the capitalist offensive but also because of the earlier policy of creating politically independent communist parties having been successful in several countries. Key communist parties were in a position to propose joint action between themselves and the non-communist organisations as a realistic contribution to unifying the class.

However when applied in situations where communist forces are small and marginalised the principles upon which the Comintern constructed the tactic of the workers' united front can yield various other forms of the united front. In the years immediately preceding the rise to power of the German Nazis Trotsky propagandised for the creation of a 'Workers' United Front against Fascism' even though the forces of Trotskyism in Germany were tiny.

That the same guiding principles applied, even where communists disposed of scant forces can be seen from Trotsky's emphasis on the immediacy of the demands to be raised and on the need to maintain the independence of the communist forces: 'The programme of action must be strictly practical, without any of those artificial 'claims', without any reservations so that every average social democratic worker can say to himself: What the communists propose is completely indispensable for the struggle against Fascism.'

But: 'No common platform with the social democracy, or with the leaders of the German trade unions; no common publications, banners or placards! March separately but strike together! Agree only how to strike, when to strike and where to strike Such an agreement can be concluded with the devil himself, with his grandmother and even with Noske and Grezinsky. On one condition: not to bind one's own hands.'

The call for a united front of the workers' organisations, then, is not predicated upon the existence of a revolutionary party sizeable enough to conclude a formal united front agreement but upon its objective necessity when the class is faced by an attack and its forces are divided. It is the logic of the class struggle that poses the need for unity in action.

The role of the communists is to consciously intervene in such a situation, advancing the demands and methods that can advance the class in the given conditions. The united front of the mass organisations of the working class, whether raised agitationaly or propagandistically, does not exhaust the arsenal of tactical weapons, based upon the same principles, that were developed by the Comintern and further elaborated by the forces of the Left Opposition, International Communist League and Fourth International.

These were designed for use, in particular, where revolutionaries were operating in highly disadvantageous circumstances, where reformism held virtually unchallenged sway over the mass of workers and communists had little or no contact with the day to day activity of the working class.

In the present period, which is characterised by precisely such features, these tactics are of particular importance for revolutionaries intent on breaking out of their isolation, reasserting the political method and programme of revolutionary Marxism and taking their places in the ranks of the workers' organisations.

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