



The Workers' Government

Mon, 30/05/1983 - 10:58

The Fourth Congress of the Communist International recognised that in countries where the relationship of forces between reformist parties and the openly bourgeois parties raised the question of which should form the government, the slogan of a workers' government, "follows inevitably from the entire united front tactic."

Even where this was not the case the slogan itself could be "used practically everywhere as a general propaganda slogan." That is to say, the argument that the government should be under the control of the workers' organisations, should act in their interests against capital and should arm the workers' organisations, is an elementary component of communist propaganda. The Fourth Congress did not complete the necessary work of elaborating the use of this slogan as a tactic.

Thereafter, scientific discussion of the question was first derailed at the Fifth Congress and later stopped altogether when the Stalinist Comintern dropped the term in favour of an open coalition with the bourgeoisie, the Popular Front.

However, in the deliberations and theses of the Fourth Congress are to be found the essential defining features of what constitutes, for communists, a real "Workers' Government":

"The overriding tasks of the workers' government must be to arm the proletariat, to disarm bourgeois, counter-revolutionary organisations, to introduce the control of production, to transfer the main burden of taxation to the rich, and to break the resistance of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie. Such a workers' government is only possible if it is born out of the struggle of the masses, is supported by workers' bodies which are capable of fighting, bodies created by the most oppressed sections of the working masses."

While this is a description of the type of government communists strive for, posed as a united front call on non-revolutionary working class parties, the slogan has an algebraic character. For communists this government will declare revolutionary war on the bourgeoisie:

"It is obvious that the formation of a real workers' government, and the continued existence of a government which pursues a revolutionary policy, must lead to bitter struggle, and eventually to civil war with the bourgeoisie."

However, if this is the content given to the slogan, "For a Workers' Government", by communists, it is clear that, since the slogan can be proposed as a united front, the reformists and reformist-led workers may, and probably will, give it another, non-revolutionary content. The Fourth Congress, therefore, found it necessary to identify five types of government to which such a label might be applied and to distinguish between them.

The first possibility was a "Liberal Workers' Government". By this was meant a government of a Labour Party which did not even profess to be socialist. This had been the case in Australia, and was likely to be the case in Great Britain. Secondly, the "Social Democratic Workers' Government" this identified a government of the social democracy, as had existed in Germany. Both of these first two were governments of "bourgeois workers' parties" and, in reality, covert coalitions with the bourgeoisie.

The Comintern recognised that, while such governments were tolerated by the bourgeoisie to fend off revolutionary offensives and that communists could give them no political support "even such governments may objectively help to accelerate the process of the disintegration of bourgeois power."

This was because, having ridden to power as representatives of the workers, such governments might be forced to go further than they wished, thereby raising the expectations and demands of their worker supporters. In addition, since they would, inevitably, side with the bourgeoisie wherever this was necessary, they could also accelerate the disillusionment of the masses in reformist parties.

The third possibility was a government of workers and poor peasants (at that time possible in the Balkans, Poland, Czechoslovakia) and the fourth, a workers' government in which communists could participate (i.e. the governmental expression of the workers' united front.) Both of these could be supported by communists:

"Communists are however prepared to act together with those workers who have not yet recognised the necessity of the proletarian dictatorship, social democrats, members of Christian parties, non-party syndicalists etc. They are thus ready, in certain conditions and with certain guarantees, to support a workers' government that is not communist . . . The two types numbered three and four, in which communists could take part, do not represent the dictatorship of the proletariat, they are not even a historically inevitable transition stage towards the dictatorship. But where they are formed they may become an important starting point for the fight for the dictatorship."

The fifth possible form of workers' government was that in which the communists themselves formed the government. This was the only "pure" form of the workers' government and was equated, by the Comintern, with the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The Comintern's typology of workers' governments is, today, somewhat anachronistic in that a convergence of the old "Liberal-Labour parties" and the social democratic parties has taken place thereby "fusing" the two types of "bourgeois workers' governments" into one.

In addition, the degeneration of the Soviet Union and its counter-revolutionary politics since the Second World War has created the possibility of a further form of the workers' government-the "bureaucratic workers' government". Here we mean a government which, under exceptional circumstances, which always involve the prior political expropriation of the working class vanguard, expropriates the bourgeoisie's property through bureaucratic measures. Thereafter, it introduces the fundamental economic structures of the dictatorship of the proletariat-a planned economy and state monopoly of foreign trade. Although this is a degenerate form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, it cannot advance the proletariat's march towards socialism, and hence cannot be proposed or demanded by revolutionaries.

The specific measures taken by such a government against capital, can however be defended. The theses on the Workers' Government adopted by the Fourth Congress bear the marks of the conflict, already developing in 1922, that accompanied the later degeneration of the Comintern. Zinoviev, for example, wished to equate the workers' government directly and only with the dictatorship of the proletariat. Such an interpretation, that a "workers' government" is simply "a synonym for dictatorship of the proletariat", robs the slogan of its use as a united front proposal. In Zinoviev's usage the slogan could only be posed ultimatistically against, for example, a social democratic government.

However, such ultimatism can easily be transformed into its opportunist opposite. This was done by Stalin and Bukharin when they equated "workers' and peasants' government" with the historically obsolete and therefore reactionary concept of the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry".

This served to obscure the crucial point, namely, that such a government would be, programmatically, a bourgeois government. Stalin and Bukharin presented the formation of such a government in China as a programmatic necessity when in reality, as Trotsky explained, such a government would be "a chief barrier upon the (socialist revolution's) path" and thus a negation of the workers' government tactic.

The dangers inherent in such loose formulations as those contained in the Comintern Theses are most clearly seen with regard to types three and four of the typology of workers' governments. These may, or may not, contain communists. The conditions upon which communists could enter such governments were strictly laid down by the Comintern: only

by consent of the Comintern, only if the communist members of such a government were under the strictest party control and were in closest contact with the workers' revolutionary organisations and, finally, only if the communists were granted absolute independence and the right of criticism.

What was not specified was the attitude to be taken either where these conditions were not met, or where, for other reasons, communists were not members of these workers' governments.

Within a year of the Fourth Congress, divisions over the attitude to be taken toward SPD and USPD-dominated regional governments within Germany, and the conditions upon which Communists might enter them, were to have disastrous effects upon the German Communist Party (KPD). The correct usage of the "workers' government tactic" can be seen from the practice of the Bolsheviks in Russia in the months between the February and October revolutions.

When the Bolsheviks demanded that all power should pass to the Soviets, they were in effect demanding a government based on the workers' own fighting organisations, that is, in the later terminology, a workers' government.

The actual forces that should compose such a government were not laid down in advance by the Bolsheviks. In this sense the demand is "algebraic". In terms of the structure of the government all that is demanded is that it be responsible to the Soviets. Its political tasks, however, are spelt out most clearly: immediate peace, workers' control over production, nationalisation of all banking, land to the peasants and the use of the armed power of the state (i.e. the soviet militia) to put down bourgeois resistance to these measures.

By winning workers to the recognition that these were the minimum necessary demands, the Bolsheviks created even greater pressure on the Mensheviks and SRs to adopt this programme. When coupled with the demand, "Break with the Bourgeoisie!" and the refusal of the Mensheviks to base themselves upon the soviets or to carry out the programme, this pressure rapidly destroyed the Menshevik majority in the Soviets.

When power did pass to the Soviets the resultant Soviet government consisted of those political parties who were prepared to base themselves upon Soviet power and carry out the necessary measures, in this case the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs. The Bolsheviks did not fetishise the role of the Soviets in the conquest of power. After the July Days, when the Bolsheviks were barred from the Soviets, they dropped the demand "All Power to the Soviets!". Instead, Lenin began to see the factory councils as the possible organisational form of the power base of the workers' government. The Soviets were only brought back to the centre of Bolshevik propaganda when they were re-democratised after the Kornilov incident.

During the Kornilov incident, the Bolsheviks were prepared to defend, arms in hand, a "bourgeois workers' government", unconditionally, against reaction. Their purpose in this was not only to allow the military preparations necessary for revolution to proceed but, more fundamentally, to keep the Mensheviks in power so that their bankruptcy and class treachery would become clear for a majority of the working class to see.

This support proved precisely to be the hangman's noose for Kerensky. It paved the way for a workers' government which was, in fact, the governmental form of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The essence of the Bolshevik usage of the workers' government tactic lies in the following:

- 1) The raising of an "action programme" of immediate measures which both answer the needs of the workers and pose the need for working class state power.
- 2) The government necessary to fulfil this programme, a workers' government is posed, initially, algebraically, its precise composition is not defined.
- 3) The workers' and peasants' parties are called on to break with the bourgeoisie and form such a government, relying for defence and support upon the workers' own fighting organisations.
- 4) As long as the reformists retain the support of the masses, communists defend them against reaction, whilst giving no political support to them and maintaining their own complete independence.
- 5) Should a government, based upon soviets, be formed by reformists or centrists, communists will defend it,

unconditionally, against reaction. As long as such a government respects soviet democracy, the communists will not violate this democracy by insurrection.

6) Throughout, the communists retain their independence of programme and organisation and their intention to seize state power as soon as the vanguard of the working class, and behind it the majority of workers, are won to the need for revolution.

Only the clash of real social forces can give the call for a workers' government a precise "arithmetical" content. Thus in 1917, the correct slogan before the Second Congress of Soviets was "All Power to the Soviets!" at the Second Congress the correct demand was "for a Bolshevik and Left S-R government".

Whilst the demand that the reformists should form a government based upon, for example, soviets is a central element of the use of the workers' government tactic, it must always be subordinated to political programme. Inasmuch as they are representative bodies, soviets can as well have a reactionary majority as a revolutionary one.

Their existence, in itself, guarantees nothing. This was proven, negatively, in the German Revolution of November 1918.

There, power lay in the hands of the councils of workers' and soldiers' delegates. As in Russia in February 1917, they handed power to their reformist leaders. The government proclaimed by SPD leaders Ebert and Scheidemann, after the failure of their attempt to save the monarchy in alliance with Prince Max von Baden, was a republican government based upon the workers' councils. It was, in its form, a workers' government.

However, its political content was that of a bourgeois workers' government, that is, a covert alliance with the bourgeoisie to contain and ultimately destroy the revolutionary offensive of the proletariat. The SPD leaders used their support in the councils to transfer their power base to a parliamentary body via the National Assembly and the Weimar Constitution.

In this they brought the form of their government into correspondence with its content. Throughout 1919 the reformists, now in open "popular front" alliance with the bourgeois and aristocratic elements, used their bourgeois state power to terrorise and liquidate the revolutionary vanguard of the working class, capitalising on their isolation from the majority of workers.

The Kapp putsch of March 1920 revealed both the flexibility and the limitations of reformism when forced to the absolute limit of its ability to manoeuvre between the classes. Ebert, Scheidemann and Noske were kept in power by the mobilised and, in part, armed workers when the bourgeois army deserted them. However, when Legien proposed a "Workers' Government" (by which he meant a "bourgeois workers' government") to ensure there was no repetition of the coup, the SPD leaders recognised that this would place them under too great pressure from the working class. In such a situation to openly proclaim the workers' councils as the basis of the government would create expectations amongst the workers which the SPD knew they could not, and would not, fulfil. Faced with this prospect, the SPD preferred to form a new alliance with the bourgeoisie.

Once the new government was firmly in power the Reichswehr was mobilised to disarm the workers' councils. At the time of Legien's proposal, the KPD opposed in principle the formation of such a "workers' government" and counterposed to it the need for revolution.

This in effect helped the SPD to get themselves off the hook and was a sectarian response. The value that the correct usage of the workers' government tactic could have had at this time is clear: insistence upon the political programme of such a government, legalisation of the workers' councils with their arms, demobilisation and disbandment of the Freikorps, immediate alliance with Soviet Russia, opposition to the Versailles reparations.

All this could have put a roadblock in Legien's path. At the same time, positive support for the idea of a government of the workers' parties and unconditional defence of such a government against reaction would have brought the KPD into closer contact with the social democratic masses and, thereby, increased the pressure on the reformists not to form an

alliance with the bourgeoisie.

Had they, nonetheless, done this, the workers would have been better prepared to take independent action in their defence as soon as the reformists tried to demobilise and disarm them.

Given that Germany is considerably more representative of reformism's hold on the working class in the advanced capitalist countries than is Russia, the lessons provided by the German experience must be learned by revolutionaries. In particular, a distinction must be made between defence of governments and political support for governments.

With regard to governments led by reformists, whether these are formally bourgeois constitutional (i.e. bourgeois workers' governments) or formally based on workers' organisation (workers' governments), communists stand prepared to defend them, arms in hand if necessary, against reaction. Political support, by contrast, can only be given to a workers' government that takes the road of revolution, that is, one that implements the central elements that define a "real" workers' government.

In line with the Comintern and the Fourth International, we do not expect the bourgeois workers' parties or centrists to prove capable of forming such a government. However, as the Transitional Programme explains, ". . . one cannot categorically deny in advance the theoretical possibility that, under the influence of completely exceptional circumstances (war, defeat, financial crash, mass revolutionary pressure, etc) the petit-bourgeois parties including the Stalinists may go further than they themselves wish along the road to breaking with the bourgeoisie."

The recognition by Trotsky of this remote, theoretical possibility, that the social democrats and Stalinists could form "real workers' governments" that broke with the bourgeoisie in some significant manner, has been distorted by the epigones of Trotsky into the proposition that governments that include such parties are "workers' governments".

To suggest that either a CP-SP government in France, for example, is a workers' government in anything other than the sense of a bourgeois workers' government (as does Pierre Lambert's FI (IC)) or that the formation of a workers' government by the British Labour Party is not only distinctly possible but strategically necessary is the most craven opportunism.

We reject such usages of the term "workers' government". The spirit of the theses of the Fourth Congress is quite clearly the following: "workers' government" refers to a government which disarms the bourgeoisie, initiates measures to remove their control over production and, in order to enforce these policies and to defend itself, arms the working class through their own organisations and holds itself responsible to those organisations.

It is in this sense that we refer to the "demand" for a workers' government by which we mean the proposal, in accordance with the principles of the united front, for communists and non-communists to close ranks, even at governmental level, to protect or advance the interests of the working class. All other forms of government by reformists and centrists are correctly referred to as "bourgeois, workers' governments." Obviously, raising the workers' government as an immediate demand depends upon circumstances.

In general, except in cases of revolutionary crisis in which the question of power is raised, communists raise the workers' government as propaganda for a real, revolutionary workers' government, while at the same time demanding of reformist parties in government that they take concrete steps to break with the bourgeoisie and act for the workers.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/workers-government-0>