

THE UNITED FRONT IN THE BUILDING OF THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

Collins: "Is it even possible to consider at this stage an independent existence outside of the mass organizations?"

Trotsky: "The fact that Lenin was not afraid to split from Plekhanov in 1905 and to remain as a small, isolated group, bears no weight, because the same Lenin remained inside the Social-Democracy until 1912, and in 1920 urged the affiliation of the British CP to the LP. While it is necessary for the Revolutionary Party to maintain its independence at all times, a revolutionary group of a few hundred comrades is not a revolutionary party, and can work most effectively at present by opposition to the social patriots within the mass parties. In view of the increasing acuteness of the international situation, it is absolutely essential to be within the mass organizations whilst there is the possibility of doing revolutionary work within them. Any such sectarian, sterile and formalistic interpretation of Marxism in the present situation would disgrace an intelligent child of ten."

(Trotsky/Collins Interview, October 1936.)

One of the consequences of the destruction of the Fourth International in an organizational sense has been the smashing of the political programme of Marxism into disparate pieces, arbitrarily scattered amongst the various Trotskyist grouplets. By concentration upon particular parts of the programme (e.g. the appeal to women or youth), many organizations have succumbed to the pressure of "single issue" politics, sectarian in-fighting, and over-emphasis upon those various pieces of the Trotskyist tradition that can be particularised into the distinguishing marks of a sect. An essential step therefore is to assert the unity of the Marxist programme. This paper is an attempt to do this with regard to the objective unity between the theory of the United Front, the building of the Revolutionary Party, the question of Soviets, and the class theory of the state. In dealing with these questions we will criticise also what in our view in the positions of our comrades of the I.K.D., Spartacist League (New Zealand) and Spartacist League (U.S.A.) is defective in this regard.

Firstly, and from this flow all other considerations, the application of the United Front and the building of the Revolutionary Party are part of the same process. The posing of demands upon the majority leadership of the working class movement is the way in which this is historically done. Trotsky, summarising the experience of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution for the guidance of the Fourth International, had this to say:

"The chief accusation which the Fourth International advances against the traditional organizations of the proletariat is the fact that they do not wish to tear themselves away from the political semi-corpse of the bourgeoisie. Under these conditions the demand systematically addressed to the old leadership: 'Break with the bourgeoisie, take the power!' is an extremely important weapon for exposing the treacherous character of the parties and organizations of the Second, Third and Amsterdam Internationals.... Of all parties and organizations which base themselves on the workers and peasants and speak in their name we demand that they break politically from the bourgeoisie and

enter upon the road of struggle for the workers' and farmers' government. On this road we promise them full support against capitalist reaction". (Transitional Programme).

The technique as indicated is thus not to counterpose mechanically the revolutionary tendency to the mass working-class movement as the only solution to their difficulties, but to demand that the reformists break their coalition with the bourgeoisie (whether expressed in Popular Fronts or elected governments) and take power on behalf of the working class. The "support" of revolutionaries for these reformists is precisely the "support" they do not want--that of a rope for a hanging man, as Lenin says. The reformists, refusing this support, then have to explain to their working class following why they fail to break with the bourgeoisie and realise the united strength and power of the working class movement at their disposal. The demand: "All Power to the Soviets", advanced when the majority of the Soviets consisted of Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, was of this nature. When the Menshevik workers saw their leaders attacking those who raised this slogan, they realised that the Bolsheviks were fighting for the united power of the Russian working class, and the Mensheviks for the power of the bourgeoisie over this class, which they thereby divided. The nature of the class struggle imbues the working class with a strong sense of solidarity and of hatred for splits and disunity. The technique and strategy of revolutionary propaganda is to place the responsibility for these on the reformists and Stalinists. To ignore this is to leave the workers under the control of the bourgeoisie and the reformists, disunited and powerless within class society. Every worker who sees and understands why the reformists attack revolutionaries for calling for power to be transferred to their organizations is a potential recruit to the revolutionary organization. This is how the Bolsheviks built up their party and smashed the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries--by "supporting" them against the bourgeoisie! They did not build up their party by counterposing themselves to the working class movement, nor did they create it by recruiting in ones and twos to a sect. At one and the same time the Bolshevik Party and the Russian Revolution were made by the conscious application of the United Front strategy.

The Bolsheviks were not stupid enough to think that you can approach the working class independently of its organizations, its parties and trade unions.--"as if the masses could somehow live outside of the conditions of the actual class struggle" (Transitional Programme). This assumption lies at the root of the Trotskyist critique of the so-called "United Front from below", a typical Third Period Stalinist invention.

When self-styled Trotskyists attempt to ignore the mass organizations, enjoining the rank-and-file to self-activity, and proposing local councils of action, then they are in fact proposing syndicalist-type politics. As Trotsky explained in his "Theses on the United Front",

"Were we able to simply unite the working masses around our banner... by eliminating the reformist party, or trade union

organizations--that, of course, would be the best way. But in that case the very question of the United Front, in its present form, would be non-existent".

Hence our disagreements with the Spartacist League's position on the slogan for an American Labour Party. By refusing to place the demand for its formation on the A.F.L./C.I.O. bureaucracies, the "Alliance for Labour", etc., they are surely demanding that the rank and file perform the task spontaneously (i.e. the classic "United Front from below"). Moreover, it is nonsense to say that a Labour Party created by the trade unions would necessarily be reformist in the U.S.A., where Social Democracy is even weaker than the revolutionary tendencies. The creation of a mass Labour Party on the basis of the organised workers would be the practical realisation of the 'United Front'; its politics would depend on how much the Marxists were able to gain influence in it (the completely reformist nature of the British Labour Party, even in the 1900's, was partly due to the sectarianism of the early British Marxists).

In the application of the 'United Front' to the situation in which we find ourselves, we would differ again with the comrades of the I.K.D. and the New Zealand Spartacist League. They seem to regard the German S.P.D. and the New Zealand Labour Party respectively as no longer being reformist, Social-Democratic parties. We would maintain that this shows a lack of understanding of the full nature of reformism. The function of the reformist bureaucracy is to divert the potential revolutionary energies of the working class into legal and reformist channels, and to gain a privileged position for itself based on the pressure of the masses. Its task of controlling the proletariat on behalf of the capitalist system may often involve not only a failure to win reforms, but positive attacks on the rights and living-standards of the working class (e.g. the conduct of the German S.P.D. in the inter-War years). The actual granting of reforms depends on whether the Imperialist system can afford them: they are often passed by ordinary bourgeois governments.

As for the particular question of the S.P.D., it is not entirely correct to say that its continuity was completely broken by the Nazi regime. Indeed, not only was the anti-Hitler resistance mainly working class, but at least until after 1941 it was mainly the work of S.P.D. and centrist elements. The I.K.D. admits that even East German workers have illusions in the S.P.D. (P.B. in Vierte Internationale, no.1, pp.55-8): how else did these develop other than as a result of the activity of the S.P.D. in the pre- and immediate post-War periods? As far as the current position goes in such countries as the G.D.R. and New Zealand, we would say that as long as the Social-Democracy is popularly seen as 'representing' organised labour in some way, maintains electoral support from the class-conscious sector of the proletariat, and has personnel (West Germany) and even official (New Zealand) link-ups with the trade union bureaucracies, then it has a dialectical nature. At once it imposes ruling class interests and ideology on the working class, but also expresses its low level of consciousness, and acts as a mild 'pressure group' for it. It is both an obstruction to an awakening of the class and at the same time a result of the past conquests and self-organization of that class. On this basis both the I.K.D. and the New Zealand

Spartacist League err in making a rigid distinction between political and trade union/economist consciousness. The latter is only the counterpart of Social-Democratic politics: trade unions are nothing but reformist organizations with the intention of gaining concessions from capitalism, and their bureaucracies fulfil the same role as those of the Social-Democracy, often being linked to them.

Furthermore, it is important to show that the Trotskyist concept of "critical support" to Stalinists, Reformists or Syndicalists, is not an afterthought arbitrarily added to the idea of the need for the building of a Trotskyist party. Any "support" our movement gives to other apparatuses is based upon the need to expose their leaderships in concrete terms before their rank-and-file and win them over to our position and organizations.

We would have hoped not to devote too much space to entrism, which we see as a tactic subordinate to the question of our orientation as discussed above. All it amounts to is the application of the 'United Front' tactic FROM WITHIN, both to 'left' and 'right' reformists, as a way of building up our own position in the movement. It also derives from our views on the nature of reformism and 'critical support', as we define them in the above. It should never be confused with the submersion or liquidation often practiced by the U.S.F.I., or with the short-term 'smash and grab raid' (in reality a sort of faction work) as with the Socialist Labour League in the Labour Party Young Socialists in 1960-64. Moreover, it should never be applied in situations (for example many Communist Parties) where the exposition of an open revolutionary programme is not possible. We consider that one of the most essential tasks of revolutionaries is to pose the class theory of the state, especially in reformist organizations. This we do by calling on the Labour Party leaders to take power, transferring control of economic resources into the hands of the labour movement, and by demanding that the T.U.C call a general strike. The difference, after all, between revolutionaries and all others, (as Lenin explains in 'State and Revolution') is precisely this understanding and application of the class theory of the state. Even reformists and centrists will make revolutionary propaganda in a revolutionary situation: our task is to do this all the time. Revolutionaries who are unable to seize power themselves have an obligation to demand that those who are in such a position, by virtue of their leadership of the labour movement, do so on its behalf.

Finally, the above demand to "break with the bourgeoisie, take the power", is the supremely transitional demand. It poses the question of dual power and the need for the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist class, yet does this concretely because it speaks to the working class in terms of institutions that are already in existence. It thus brings together the 'end' and the 'means' to accomplish it. Without it revolutionaries are forced to copy the methodology of the old S.P.D.'s "Erfurt Programme", which was rigidly divided into maximum and minimum statements. Many revolutionary organizations are forced to make a division between their ultimate programme, the seizure of state power, based upon simple numerical recruitment to their group, and their immediate agitational pro-

gramme, usually one of reformist and trade union demands. In this context it is important to recall the strictures of Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg upon two-stage programmes. We feel that this dilemma--the need to make broad propaganda on the one hand, and to build up the revolutionary organization on the other--lies behind the Spartacist League (U.S.A.)'s definition of itself as a 'fighting propaganda group' rather than an activist organization as such. The same mistake lies behind the different varieties of the theory of the 'primitive accumulation of cadres' and other "stages" ideas about the building of the revolutionary party. The only way to solve the objective difficulty posed by the magnitude of the tasks ahead on the one hand, and the extreme weakness of the revolutionary vanguard on the other, is by slogans of this character.

The value of this outlook can be briefly summarised. We do not see, as most Marxists appear to do, the 'United Front' as a temporary non-aggression pact between sectarians, having no organic contact with the body of Trotskyist theory as a whole. We do not see the question of the United Front as being separate from that of building the revolutionary party. We do not see it as being separate from the necessity of exposing the mystification of the bourgeois state, or the need to destroy reformism in the working class movement. Finally, we consider that it restores its "transitional" character to Marxism, and breaks down the un-Trotskyist division between propaganda and activity.

By stating this, we are merely trying to assert our main contention: that the precondition for the reconstruction of the Fourth International is the re-assertion of the fundamental unity of Marxist theory.

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