

# THE SOCIALIST EXPERIENCE

THE

# POPULAR FRONT

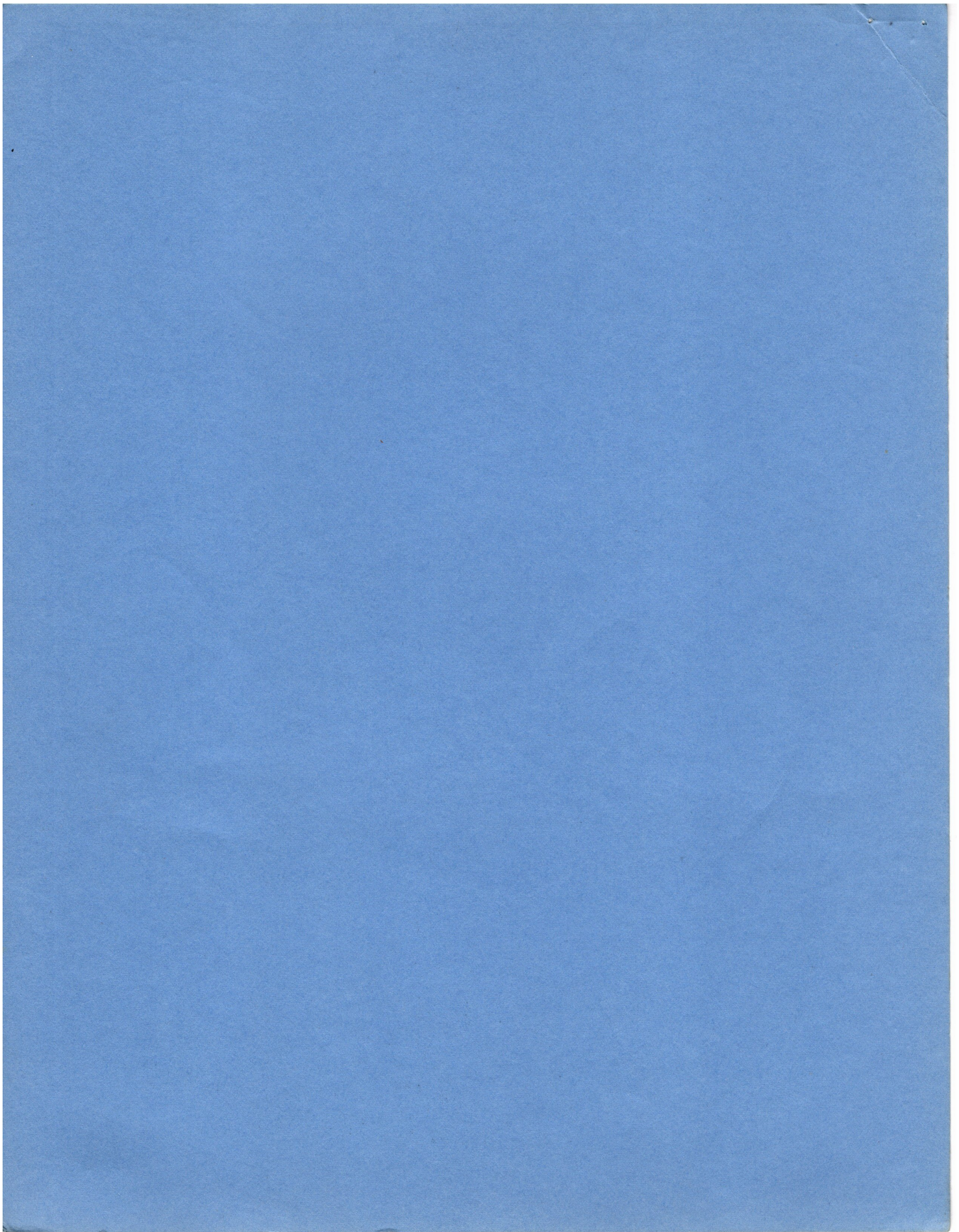
OF THE 1930s

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INTERNATIONAL SOCIALISTS

IN A SERIES OF EDUCATIONAL REPRINTS DESIGNED TO BRING TO TODAY'S SOCIALISTS THE LESSONS OF THE PAST



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# INTRODUCTION

The tragic events in Chile that led to the overthrow of the Popular Unity coalition and the reign of terror that has been unleashed against the Chilean working class have had their parallel in history before. The Popular Front period, initiated by the Communist International (Comintern) in 1935 led to the same results as in Chile in Spain, and to other disasters for the working class elsewhere. It was the failure of the Communist Party and the left-wing in Chile to learn the lessons of this disastrous period which made the defeat in Chile inevitable: unless revolutionaries learn these lessons such defeats will inevitably continue.

The Popular Front period was initiated following the disastrous outcome of the previous Comintern policy, called the "third period." The Russian bureaucracy initiated this policy in 1928. It was largely a means of weakening the ability of Western imperialism to attack Russia during the first five-year plan and the forced collectivization of the peasantry. It was also a way of justifying the acute internal social conflict and the convulsions occasioned by these acts.

Huge social turmoil and resistance were created inside Russia, and ended in the deaths of literally millions of resisters and in millions of others being thrown into concentration camps and forced labor camps. Such turmoil could have been tempting to the Western capitalists who were not especially interested in the vital question that was being fought out in Russia then: who would rule -- the working class or the bureaucracy, both of them anti-capitalist. The bureaucracy was as interested as the capitalist ruling class in exploiting the toiling masses, and the main concern of the capitalists was in restoring capitalism to Russia. (At the same time, of course, the capitalists recognized that the Russian bureaucracy was far less prone to urge and organize world revolution than the workers' regime had been. Even though the bureaucracy was an enemy of capitalism, it was one with which they could come to terms. Thus, it was no accident that the United States was willing to accord diplomatic recognition to Russia in 1933, after the bureaucracy had consolidated its rule. Before then Russia had been viewed only as an implacable enemy.)

So, the Comintern proclaimed the Third Period. The first period was said to have been a period of revolution, started by the Russian revolution. The second was a period of capitalist consolidation and temporary stability. The third period was stated to be a new period of revolutionary upheavals. The Communist Parties were ordered to initiate intense class struggle -- irrespective of what the consciousness and organization of the working class was.

All opposition to the Communist Parties was branded as fascist. The worst kind of fascism were the Social Democratic parties, which the Communist Parties called "social fascists." This policy precluded any kind of united front with the Social Democratic parties or with their followers to defend against the *real* fascists, and it was directly responsible for the rise to power of Hitler in Germany and the crushing of the working class and the Communist movement in that country.

Terrified by the new monster facing it, the Russian bureaucracy began back-peddling on the third period. By 1935, policy had been completely reversed: the Popular Front had begun.

On May 2, 1934, France and Russia signed a military assistance pact against Germany. There was nothing wrong with a supposed workers' state being compelled to sign a military agreement with an imperialist robber. But it did not stop there. The pact was presented not as something forced upon them by circumstances, but as a great victory.

To demonstrate its sincerity to its new-found bourgeois friend, the Russian bureaucracy demanded that the French Communist Party change its attitude toward the French government. The French working class was not asked to continue its independent struggle but to join with its ruling class against fascist Germany -- all of Germany, including the German working class. The line was clearly stated at the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern:

*"If German fascism attacks the national independence and unity of small independent nations in Europe, a war waged by the national bourgeoisie of these countries will be a just war in which proletarians and communists cannot avoid taking part."*<sup>1</sup>

This was a far cry from Lenin's slogan of "Turn the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war," or even from the statement a few months earlier by the French Communist Party: "We love our country, but we cannot countenance national defense under the capitalist regime." What it meant was the subordination of the working class to the bourgeoisie in the name of anti-fascism.

This was only the first step in the policy adopted by the Seventh World Congress. At that conference Georgi Dimitroff gave a speech setting the line adopted by the Comintern. Dimitroff called for a "people's front" in which virtually everything would be subordinated to the anti-fascist struggle. Using fine rhetoric, Dimitroff guaranteed that the class struggle would continue.

At the same time he vowed: "We shall not attack anyone, neither persons nor organizations nor parties that stand for the united front of the working class against the class enemy."<sup>2</sup> Their pledge to curb criticisms was not only directed at the working class parties, but at all parties that entered into the anti-fascist front, just as Allende attacked those who criticized the Army generals who eventually overthrew his government.

The "people's front" policy promised that the Communist Parties would support governments of their anti-fascist allies. That is, they would support governments they did not control and that were not exclusively run by or controlled by the working class. In doing so, they abandoned what had been Marxist policy for generations and the line that had guided the Bolshevik Party after the February Revolution of 1917: **no collaboration with the class enemy.**

The Bolsheviks had refused to enter a government that was not exclusively controlled by the working class because they refused to take responsibility for a government that was controlled by the bourgeoisie, and that therefore would maintain capitalism. To take responsibility for a capitalist government would be to disorient the working class, to weaken it in its struggle for power, to attempt to reconcile the working class needs to the needs of the still-capitalist-controlled government.

To attempt to reconcile the working class to its capitalist government meant -- as it had to -- that the needs of the working class had to be subordinated to those of the bourgeoisie. The pledge in advance of the Communist Parties to keep quiet guaranteed that they could not educate the working class, could not prepare it for the inevitable clashes, could not *lead* it in a struggle for workers' power.

The Comintern had been formed because of the betrayal by the Second International of Social Democratic Parties of the cause of the working class. Specifically, the parties of the Second International had joined with their national bourgeoisies in an imperialist war and refused to lead the working class to the seizure of power. Rather, they had helped the bourgeoisie

stifle the revolutionary stirrings of the working class. The Communist Parties were now following in their predecessors' footsteps.

Thus, in France they supported Leon Blum's government and when the working class began seizing factories they attempted to curb their actions, as Allende did in Chile. They fervently urged the arming of the French government against Germany. That is, they called for the arming of an imperialist government, not for the arming of the working class. This could only mean that as the class struggle became more intense the ruling class was more capable of crushing them.

In the United States, where factory occupations were also sweeping across the country, the Communist Party did not try to channel them into a political movement of opposition to Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. On the contrary, the Democratic Party was proclaimed as the People's Front.

In China, the policy was pursued under the name "bloc of four classes." The petty-bourgeoisie, the "progressive" Chinese bourgeoisie were seen as potential allies; also landlords and agents of foreign businessmen. The Chinese Communist Party called for the creation of a single government of national defense. One of the leaders of the party, Wang Ming, stated:

*"We Chinese Communists openly declare that we support the Kuomintang and the Nanking Government (Chiang Kai-shek's government -- JT), and will fight shoulder to shoulder with them against Japanese imperialism."*<sup>3</sup>

This policy inevitably meant subordination of the working class and the poor peasantry to the bourgeoisie and to the landlords. Mao openly admitted this:

*"We have already adopted a decision not to confiscate the land of the rich peasantry, and if they come to us to fight against Japan, not to refuse to unite with them. We are not confiscating the property and the factories of the big and small Chinese merchants and capitalists. We protect their enterprises and help them to expand so that the material supply in the Soviet districts so necessary for the anti-Japanese campaign may be augmented in this way."*<sup>4</sup>

George Padmore, the highest black official in the Comintern, made clear what the "people's front" policy meant for blacks. C.L.R. James recounts how Padmore came to see him in London in 1935:

*"He said, 'They are changing their policy,' and George told me that they had now told him they were going to make friends with the democratic imperialists, Britain, France and the United States; and that future pro-Negro propaganda should be directed against Germany, Japan and Italy, and played quite softly in regard to the 'democracies.' Padmore said, 'But that is impossible.' He said, 'Germany and Japan have no colonies in Africa, so how can I say that the Negroes in Africa must be emancipated, but they have friends in the democratic imperialists of France and England?' They said, 'Well, that is the line.' He said, 'Well, that may be your line, but that is a mess,' and packed up and left."*<sup>5</sup>

The worst disaster was in Spain, where workers' revolution broke out shortly after the Comintern adopted the people's front policy. Factories were seized; workers militias were organized; sailors took over their ships, shot their officers, elected sailors' committees; armed workers committees displaced customs officers to prevent reactionaries from entering the country; the peasantry seized the land.

The Spanish government was concerned with crushing the workers revolution -- even if that meant losing to Franco. The Communist Party, following the popular front line, claimed that all that was going on in Spain was a war between "democracy" and fascism: there was no workers revolution and so, in order to substantiate this point of view, they were forced to play a counterrevolutionary role: suppressing the workers organizations, shooting revolutionary workers, keeping guns

out of their hands, even when that crippled the war effort against Franco. As participants in the Spanish government, they refused to take the only policy which could have led to victory: revolutionary policy.

They did not proclaim Spanish Morocco, Franco's base, as free and call upon the Moroccans to rise up and fight to retain their liberty which a Franco regime would have taken back from them. They did not call upon the peasantry to seize the land, the workers to seize the factories, a policy which would not only have strengthened the resolve of the masses to resist Franco, but one which would have weakened him behind his own lines.

(Had such a policy been followed in France, instead of the popular front strategy of arming the government against Germany, it would have been possible to appeal to the international solidarity of the German proletariat. Instead, the nationalist policy in France simply helped to solidify Hitler's hold over Germany.)

The result of these disastrous policies for Spain was the defeat of the Spanish revolution and almost forty years of the Franco dictatorship, with no end in sight. In France, it meant the thorough disorientation of the working class and the dissipation of its forces. Elsewhere, it meant the failure of the working class to organize itself as a class in opposition to the ruling class.

It was with this record of disastrous defeats that the Allende government embarked upon a course of action that could only and did indeed lead to another defeat. It is the Chilean working class who are paying for it with their lives and their living conditions.

If there is one thing the popular front showed, both in its various applications in the 1930's and in Chile, it is the need for a revolutionary seizure of power by the working class. There are no shortcuts to power, no compromises. Marx stated the lesson long ago: *the interests of the working class and the bourgeoisie are counterposed; there can be no reconciliation. There is no "good" bourgeoisie and "bad" bourgeoisie. There is only the bourgeoisie, the capitalist ruling class, which exists only on the basis of its exploiting the working class.*

**The working class cannot take hold of the existing state machinery and use it for its own purposes. It must smash the existing state and construct its own state machinery on a completely different basis: on the basis of full workers' democracy and workers' control. In order to accomplish this task the working class must forge its own instrument for that purpose: a revolutionary party, a party that can lead the working class to an understanding of its historic task, that can mobilize the class for the seizure of power, that can lead it to take power. Such a party does not exist today. It did not exist in Chile; it does not exist elsewhere. It must be built.**

The Communist Parties in Spain, France, China and elsewhere in the 1930's and in Chile in the 1970's did not follow the road of revolution, but of class collaboration. Elsewhere today, in France, in Britain, in the United States, the Communist Parties continue to propose the same policies, even after the disaster in Chile. Even in Chile the Communist Party is today attempting to rally all those who oppose the fascists in one movement. Even now it refuses to organize the working class independently, refuses to state that what is necessary is the revolutionary seizure of power by the working class.

Why? Why do these parties systematically refuse to learn the lessons, continue to pursue policies that have *proven* themselves over and over again to be disastrous?

It is not because these parties have stupid leaderships that they persist in following roads that can only lead to destruction.

The Stalinists, no matter what brand -- the Communist Parties, the Maoists, etc. -- and those of the Social Democrats have one thing in common: *they oppose, do not like, are afraid of*

*the independent organization and activity of the working class.* The Communist Parties and the Maoists are anti-capitalist and they encourage and organize the class struggle. But, they attempt to ride it, like a battering ram, to power.

However, they do not want it to get out of hand. Their aim is to create a new exploitative class society: bureaucratic collectivism, like those that exist today in Russia, China, Cuba and all the other so-called "Communist" countries. If the working class acts *too* independently they will not be able to control it.

Thus, in 1968, the French working class spontaneously seized the factories in the largest general strike in the history of the world. The French Communist Party did not encourage this movement. It did not urge the workers to stay in the factories, to start running them, to elect representatives to workers' councils -- in other words, to carry the organized power of the working class as far as possible. Instead, they urged the workers to go home, to isolate and atomize their power so as to make them more subject to bureaucratic manipulation. To have done the opposite would have been for the French Communist Party to lose control over the French working class.

**That is why the Communist Parties continue to urge the "peaceful road to socialism" even after disasters like Chile. It is a road that does not exist, but which they see as a means to attain their end: the establishment of a new exploiting class society with themselves as the new ruling class. And it is a means of avoiding what they most fear: the independent revo-**

**lutionary self-activity of the working class. That is why these parties are not and cannot be the kind of revolutionary parties that must be built.**

The articles included here, all from the *New International*, present both a theoretical basis for appraising the popular front and give some closer view of the record of the popular front government in France.

The first was a speech by Trotsky to the Third Congress of the Communist International explaining the united front: what its purpose was, how it was to be used, under what conditions, etc. The speech was fully endorsed by the Comintern, at that time under Lenin's direction.

The second, an article by Arne Swabeck, explains the united front and differentiates it from the popular front policy of the Stalinists, explaining how the latter has nothing in common with revolutionary policy.

The next two are articles, written in 1936 and 1938, appraising the French popular front government at those times. The final article appeared in the magazine of the British IS, *International Socialism*, No. 56.

For further reading on the popular front the following are advised: Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution*; Felix Morrow, *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Spain*; the following articles by Trotsky: "Stalin Has Signed the Death Certificate of the Third International," "The Seventh Congress of the Comintern" in *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1934-35*; and "The Comintern's Liquidation Congress" in *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1935-36*.

Jack Trautman

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Lewis Coser and Irving Howe, *The American Communist Party*, p. 322.

<sup>2</sup>Georgi Dimitroff, "United Front Against Fascism," p. 30.

<sup>3</sup>*Communist International*, Vol. 14, No. 10, Oct., 1937.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in the *New International*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Jan., 1938.

<sup>5</sup>C.L.R. James speech in *Radical America*, Vol. II, No. 4, 1968, p. 25.

# The Question of the United Front

COMRADES, I was not present at the session yesterday, but I have read attentively the two speeches which are opposed in principle to the tactic defined by the Executive: the speeches of our comrades Terracini and Daniel Renoult.

Now, I am in full agreement with comrade Radek when he says that the speech of comrade Terracini is nothing but a new and, I must confess, not quite improved edition of the objections which he once made to certain theses of the Third Congress.

But the situation has changed since then.

During the Third Congress there was the danger that the Italian communist party or other parties would engage in actions that might become very dangerous. Now, on the contrary, the negative danger threatens that the Italian party will abstain from actions which can and must be profitable for the labor movement.

It may of course be said that this negative danger is not so great as the positive danger. But time is an important factor in politics and if we let it slip by it is always utilized against us by others.

Comrade Terracini said: We are naturally for mass action and for the conquest

Trotsky's speech was delivered at the height of the discussion in the Communist International on the question of the united front. In the communist party of France, the greatest opposition to the united front came from the right wing, among whose most prominent spokesmen was the then party secretary, L.-O. Frossard and Victor Méric. As may be seen from Trotsky's polemical reply, the question of the united front sixteen years ago was bound up with the question of an early version of the People's Front, i.e., the *bloc des Gauches*, or "left bloc" with the Radicals and the social democrats, if not in the conception of the Comintern leaders, then at least in that of the right wing. Also involved was the relation between the Soviet republic and its foreign policy, on the one side, and proletarian policy in the capitalist countries, on the other. The manner in which this relationship was fixed at that time is in sharp contrast with the Stalintern manner of today. The reader will not fail to notice the topical, as well as historical, significance of the polemic.—ED.

of the masses. He repeats this time and again in his speeches. On the other hand, however, he says: Although we are for the common struggle of the proletariat, we are against the united front as proposed by the Executive.

Comrades, when the representative of a

proletarian party continually asserts: We are for the conquest of the majority of the proletariat, we are for the slogan, "To the masses!"—this sounds like a somewhat belated echo of the discussions at the Third Congress. At that time we all believed that we were already in the full swing of the revolution; the feelings and moods of the proletariat, born of the war, the rather vague sentiments in favor of the revolution—of the Russian revolution as well as of the revolution in general—were regarded as sufficient for the revolution itself. But the events showed that this appraisal was wrong. During the Third Congress, we discussed this and we said: No, a new stage is now beginning; the bourgeoisie does not stand quite firmly on its feet for the moment, but still firmly enough to oblige us communists first to win the confidence of the broadest masses of workers in order to crush the bourgeoisie.

Comrade Terracini continues to repeat: We are for action to conquer the masses. Certainly, but we have already entered a more advanced stage, we are now discussing the *methods* of winning the masses in action. From this standpoint—how to conquer the masses—the parties are divided

large groups:

First, there are the parties which are but at the beginning of their successes and which are not yet in a position to play a big rôle in the immediate action of the masses. Naturally, these parties have a great future, like all the other communist parties, but right now they cannot count very much upon the action of the proletarian masses for they are numerically weak as organizations. Hence, these parties must fight for the time being for the conquest of a basis, of the possibility of influencing the proletariat in its action (our English party is now emerging from this situation with ever-increased success).

On the other side there are parties which completely dominate the proletariat. I believe comrade Kolarov is right in claiming that this is the case with Bulgaria. What does this mean? It means that Bulgaria is ripe for the proletarian revolution and that only international conditions stand in its way. It is clear that in such a situation the question of the united front scarcely exists. In Belgium and England, on the other hand, it signifies the struggle for the possibility of influencing the proletariat and of cooperating in its movement.

Between these two extremes, there are parties which represent a power, not only in ideas but also through their numerical and organizational strength. This is already the case with most of the communist parties. Their strength may come to a third of the organized vanguard, a fourth, even a half or a bit more—that does not alter the situation in general.

What task confronts these parties? To conquer the overwhelming majority of the proletariat. And to what end? To lead the proletariat to the conquest of power, to the revolution. When will this moment be reached? We do not know. Perhaps in six months, perhaps in six years. Maybe the interval will differ for the various countries between these two figures. But speaking theoretically, it is not excluded that this preparatory period will last even longer. In that case, I ask: What will we do during this period? Continue to fight for the conquest of the majority, for the confidence of the entire proletariat. But this will not be attained by today or tomorrow; for the moment we are the party of the vanguard of the proletariat. And now still another question: Should the class struggle stop meanwhile, until we have conquered the entire proletariat? I put this question to comrade Terracini and also to comrade Renoult: Should the struggle of the proletariat for its daily bread stop until the moment when the communist party, supported by the entire working class, is in a position to seize the power? No, this struggle does not stop, it continues. The workers who belong to our party and those who do not join it, like the members of the social-democratic party and others, all of them—depending on the stage and the character of the working class in question—are disposed and able to fight for their immediate

*diate interests is always, in our epoch of great imperialist crisis, the beginning of a revolutionary struggle.* (This is very important but I mention it here only parenthetically.)

Now then, the workers who do not join our party and who do not understand it (that is precisely the reason why they do not enter it), want to have the possibility to fight for the piece of daily bread, for the bit of meat, etc. They see before them the communist party, the socialist party, and they do not understand the reason why they have parted company. They belong to the reformist General Confederation of Labor [C.G.T.], to the socialist party of Italy, etc., or else they do not belong to any party organization. Now, what do these workers think? They say: Let these organizations or sects—I don't know how these not very conscious workers call them in their language—give us the possibility of conducting the fight for our daily needs. We cannot answer them: But we have separated in order to prepare your great future, your great day-after-tomorrow! They will not understand this, because they are completely absorbed by their "today". If they were able to grasp this, to them, entirely theoretical argument, they would have joined our party. With such a mental outlook and confronted with the fact of different trade union and political organizations, they have no means of orienting themselves; they find it impossible to undertake any immediate action, no matter how small or partial. Along comes the communist party and tells them: Friends, we are divided. You think it's a mistake; I want to explain the reasons. You don't understand them? I regret it greatly, but we are already in existence, we communists, socialists, reformists and revolutionary syndicalists; we have our independent organizations for reasons which are entirely sufficient for us communists. Nevertheless we communists propose an immediate action in your struggle for bread and meat, we propose it to you and to your leaders, to every organization that represents a part of the proletariat!

This is entirely in the spirit of mass psychology, the psychology of the proletariat and I contend that the comrades who protest against it with so much passion (which is easily explained by the importance and gravity of the question), reflect far more the painful process of their still fresh separation from the reformists and opportunists than the mood of the broad proletarian masses. I understand very well that for a journalist who was for a long time in the same editorial board of, let us say, *l'Humanité*, together with Longuet, and separated from him after great difficulties—the prospect of turning to Longuet again after all this, to propose negotiations to him, is a psychological and moral torment. But the working class, the masses, the millions of French workers, do not give a tinker's dam about these things (one can say "unfortunately!"), because they do not

them: We communists are now taking the initiative in mass action for your piece of bread—whom will the workers condemn and pillory for this? The Communist International, the French communist party? No, never.

In order to show you, comrades, that the hesitations gaining ground in France, especially in France, do not reflect the moods of the proletarian masses, but rather a belated echo of the painful process of separation from the old party, I will quote you from a few articles. I beg your forgiveness: the French comrades make merry a bit over our infatuation for quotations; one of them has made some very sprightly remarks about the vastness of our "documentation", but there is nothing else for us to do. Naturally, quotations are the desiccated flowers of the labor movement, but if you know a bit of botany and if you have also seen the flowers in the sunny fields, then even these desiccated samples will give you an idea of the reality.

I will quote you from a comrade well known in France: comrade Victor Méric. He now represents more or less the opposition to the united front in a manner comprehensible by all; he vulgarizes his opposition in his ironical manner. Listen to what he says. This is supposed to be a joke—a bad one, to me, but in any case, a joke:

"Why not make a united front with Briand? After all, Briand is only a Dissident, a Dissident of the first draft, a pioneer Dissident; but just the same he belongs to the great family." (*Journal du Peuple*, Jan. 13, 1922.)

What is the meaning of this? At the moment when the Executive says to the French comrades: You, the French party, represent only a part of the working class, it is necessary to find the ways and means for a common action of the masses—the voice from Paris replies:

"Why not make a united front with Briand?"

One can say, that is irony and it appears in a paper created especially for irony of this sort, the *Journal du Peuple*. But I have here a quotation from the same author in the *Internationale*—and that is incomparably more important—where he says literally:

"And permit me to put one single question—oh! without the slightest irony . . . [notice this, comrades, these are the words of Victor Méric himself: "without the slightest irony"] . . ."

INTERRUPTIONS: For once! . . . It doesn't often happen.

TROTSKY: "And permit me to put one single question—oh! without the slightest irony! If this thesis is accepted in France and if, tomorrow, the Poincaré-la-Guerre ministry, upset, gives way to a Briand or Viviani cabinet, determined partisan of peace, of disarmament, of an accord among the peoples and the recognition of the Soviets, won't our deputies in parliament have to consolidate, by their votes, the



position of this bourgeois government? And even if—anything can happen!—a portfolio were offered to one of our people, should he refuse it?" (*Internationale*, Jan. 22, 1922.)

This appears—oh! without the slightest irony!—not in the *Journal du Peuple*, but in the *Internationale*, the organ of our party. Thus, for Victor Méric it is not a question of unifying the action of the proletariat, but of his relations to this or that Dissident, to the Dissidents of yesterday or of the day before. As you can see, his argument is taken from the realm of international policy: In case a Briand government were inclined to recognize the Soviets, would the Moscow International impose upon us a collaboration with this government?

Comrade Terracini did not say quite the same thing as comrade Méric, but he too conjured up the specter of an alliance among three powers: Powers No. 3, 2 and 2½—Germany, Austria and Germany. Comrade Zinoviev said in the plenary session, and I in the commission, that there are comrades who seek in our views or in our "deviations", reasons of state. They say that it is not our mistakes as communists, but rather our interests as Russian statesmen that drive us to the tactic of the united front. And that is precisely the veiled accusation of Victor Méric.

Now, remember that as far back as the Third Congress it was pointed out that the right wing, and particularly the lackeys of the right wing, interpreted the March events in Germany as the product of suggestions from Moscow for saving the muddled situation of the Soviets. When, at the Third Congress, certain methods employed during the March Action were condemned, it was the extreme left, the Communist Labor Party of Germany, who declared that the Soviet government is against the revolutionary movement and wants to postpone the world revolution for a time in order to be able to do business with the bourgeoisie of the West.

Now the same things are being warmed up again in connection with the united front.

Comrades, the interests of the Soviet republic cannot be other than the interests of the international revolutionary movement. If this tactic is injurious to you, comrades of France, or to you, comrades of Italy, then it is completely injurious *also to us*. And if you believe that we are absorbed and hypnotized by our position as statesmen to such an extent that we are no longer able to judge and grasp correctly the interests of the labor movement—then it would be proper to introduce into the statutes of our International a paragraph which says that the party that has arrived at the lamentable position of the conquest of power must be expelled from the International. (*Laughter*.)

Instead of such accusations—note that they are not formal accusations, but insinuations which go hand in hand with the more or less official and ritualistic eulogies

of the Russian revolution—I would rather that we were criticized a little more. If, for example, we were to receive from the Central Committee of the French party a letter saying: "You are now following the New Economic Policy; take care that you don't break your neck, for you have gone too far in your relations with the capitalists"; or if the French delegation were to say: "We have seen your military review; you are copying the old militarism too closely and it may have a bad effect upon the young workers"; or if you were to say: "Your diplomacy is much too diplomatic; it gives out interviews, it writes notes which may hurt us in France"—in brief, if you were to criticize us openly, dotting the *i*'s and crossing the *t*'s, such forthright relations would be far more desirable to us than the detestable manner which goes in for hints. But all this is in passing.

After the argument from international policy, Victor Méric has an argument of a sentimental character:

"Just the same, this coming January 15, when we commemorate the two martyrs, it will do no good to come to speak to us about a united front with the friends of the Scheidemanns, the Noskes, the Eberts and other assassins of socialists and workers." (*Internationale*, Jan. 8, 1922.)

Naturally, this is an argument that cannot fail to influence very simple workers who have a revolutionary feeling but not sufficient political education. Comrade Zinoviev referred to it in his speech. And comrade Thalheimer said: Comrades, if there are sentimental reasons for not sitting down at the same table with the people of the Second and the Two-and-a-Half Internationals, these reasons are valid primarily for us Germans. But how can a French communist make a statement which amounts to saying that the German communists are devoid of this revolutionary feeling, of hatred against the traitors and assassins of the Second International?

I think that their hatred is not less than that of the literati and journalists who were removed from the events. If our German comrades nevertheless carry out the tactic of the united front, the reason is that they see it as a political action and not at all as a moral reconciliation with the social democratic leaders.

The third argument is more or less decisive. We find it in an article by the same author:

"The Seine Federation has just adopted a decision on important questions: it rejects the united front by a strong majority. This simply signifies that although a year has passed, it has no intention of reversing itself. This means that after having consented to perform the painful operation, which the Tours split was, it refuses to rake up everything all over again, to appeal to those people from whom we separated." (*Internationale*, Jan. 22, 1922.)

That is how the united front is presented. It is the return to the situation before Tours. And Fabre, the hospitable Fabre, declares that he is entirely in agreement

with the tactic of the united front, but with one observation—and for myself I have no observation to make:

"Why should socialist and labor unity have been destroyed, with pistol in hand?"

Thus it is all clear. By putting the question in this way, acceptance of the united front means the return to the situation before Tours, it is collaboration, truce, the holy alliance with the Dissidents, the reformists. After having put the question this way, there follows the discussion on the tactic to adopt: to accept or to reject. Méric says: I reject, together with the Seine Federation. Fabre says: No, I accept, I accept.

Comrades, even in Frossard, who is certainly a politician of great value, whom we all know and who does not deal only with the funny side of a question—even in him we do not find weightier arguments. No, it is still the idea of a reconciliation with the Dissidents and not the question of the united front. Now I ask: does this question exist in France or not?

The French communist party has 130,000 members; the party of the Dissidents has a very weak membership and I draw your attention to the fact that the French comrades have named the reformists the "Dissidents". Why? So as to denounce them before the proletariat as disrupters of the united front, as Dissidents, that is, as social-traitors. Similarly, the revolutionary C.G.T. calls itself "Unitary" in order to demonstrate that one of its aims, its main aim, is to assure the unity of action of the proletariat.

I might also say that your *methods* and your actions are better than the *arguments* you have employed against the tactic formulated by the Executive Committee of the Communist International. I repeat: the party has 130,000 members and the Dissidents, let us say, 30,000, 40,000 or 50,000. No matter. . . .

INTERRUPTIONS: 15,000! Yes, the figures of the Dissidents are not always exact! It's very hard to learn what they are.

TROTSKY: They are a minority, but not an entirely negligible minority.

Then there are the trade unions. A few years ago they had two million members; at least so they declared—the statistics of the French trade union movement are more spirited than its revolutionary enthusiasm—and now—I take my figures—there are 300,000 members in the Unitary C.G.T. Before the split the trade unions had 500,000 members all told.

Now, the proletariat class in France numbers millions.

The party has 130,000 members.

The revolutionary trade unions have 300,000.

The reformist trade unions have perhaps a little more or a little less than 200,000.

The Dissidents have 15,000 (30,000 or 40,000).

That is the situation.

TO BE SURE, the party is in a very favorable situation; it is the most influential political organization. But it is not the dominant one! What is this party at the present moment? The French party is the result, the crystallization of that great revolutionary wave of the proletariat which rose out of the war, thanks to the courageous action of the comrades who stood at the head of the movement at the time. They used this upswing of the masses, their vague but revolutionary, primitively revolutionary sentiment, to transform the old party into a communist party.

The revolution, however, did not come. The masses had the feeling that it would come today or tomorrow; now it sees that it is not breaking out. As a consequence, there is a certain ebb and only the élite of the proletariat remains in the party. But the great mass experience, so to speak, a psychological reflux. It expresses itself in the fact that the workers leave the trade unions. The trade unions are losing in membership. Formerly they counted in the millions, and now they are no longer members. Men and women join for a few weeks, a few months, and then they leave. What does this mean? The great mass of the proletariat naturally remains true to the ideal of the revolution, but this ideal has acquired a vaguer and less realizable character, has become remote. The communist party remains, with its doctrine and its tactics. There exists a small dissident group which, during this tumultuous period of revolution, has lost all its influence and its authority. But let us suppose that this transitory situation lasts another year, two years, three years, let us suppose this—we do not wish it, but we make the supposition in order to picture the situation—how will the working class of France act if, under such circumstances, there would be a general action in the country? How will it group itself? The numerical relation between the communist party and the party of the dissidents is 4 to 1, and among the

working masses the relationship of vague revolutionary sentiments to conscious revolutionary sentiments is perhaps 99 to 1.

This situation lingers on without becoming stabilized and, meanwhile, the time for the new elections is drawing close. What will the French worker think? He says to himself: Yes, the communist party is perhaps a good party, the communists are good revolutionists; but right now there is no revolution, the question is the elections; the problem today is Poincaré, is the last great effort of revenge-nationalism, just like the last blaze of a dying lamp.

After that, what is left for the bourgeoisie? The Left Bloc. But for the success of this political combination, a prop, an instrument is needed inside the ranks of the working class. This instrument is the party of the dissidents. Is it acceptable? At one time we acquired magnificent propaganda successes with *l'Humanité*, which has 200,000 readers, with our schools, etc.

But there are other means and we seek to set the broad masses into motion by organizing meetings, by the excellent speeches of our French friends who, as you know, are not lacking in eloquence. Well, the elections come along. And a great mass of workers will probably reason thus: Yes, a parliament of the Left Bloc is at all events preferable to a parliament of Poincaré, of the National Bloc. And that will be the moment for the dissidents to play a political rôle. It is true that they are not numerically strong as a political organization. They have newspapers which are not, to be sure, widely read, because the most indifferent, the most disillusioned mass of the proletariat reads nothing; it has lost its illusions, it waits for events to occur, and it has a fine flair for coming events without reading. Only the thoroughly revolutionary workers have the urge for the printed word. Under such conditions, the organization of the dissidents, this small instrument of the bourgeoisie, can acquire weighty political importance. It becomes our problem, then,

to discredit in advance the idea of the Left Bloc before the French proletariat. That is a very important question for the French party. I do not say that this Left Bloc would be a misfortune for us. It would be a gain also for us, provided that the proletariat does not participate in it. Let the others collaborate in the Bloc, but not the French workers; the others will only discredit themselves thereby in advance. The big and petty bourgeoisie, the financial and industrial bourgeoisie, the bourgeois intelligentsia—let them all stake their bets on the Left Bloc as they please; we, however, will endeavor to profit by it, and to unite all the workers, at whatever cost, into the united front against the bourgeoisie, bridging all the splits and groupings in the working class.

We do not want, right now, to formulate exactly the methods of our procedure, to ask whether it will be an open or a closed letter to the executive committee of the dissidents—in case there is one. The main thing is to discredit in advance the left bourgeoisie in the eyes of the broad working masses, to compel it to take a position. This bourgeois reserve army still holds back, it does not want to expose itself, it awaits the coming events in the shelter of its editorial chambers and its parliamentary clubs, it aims to let these great and small events occur without being implicated in them and discredited by them. Then, when the elections come, these left groupings emerge from their reserve, appear before the masses, and say: Yes, yes, the communists . . . but we offer you this, that and the other advantage. We communists have the greatest interest in drawing these gentlemen out of their shelters, out of their chambers, and to place them before the proletariat, particularly on the basis of mass action. That is how things stand, that is how the question is presented to us. It is not at all a question of a *rapprochement* with Longuet. And really, comrades, that would be a bit thick, wouldn't it?

\*Concluded from last issue.

... sixteen months ago, we sought to impress the French comrades with the necessity of expelling even Longuet. And now come the comrades who were not quite firm at that time with regard to the 21 conditions, and tell us: You are imposing a *rapprochement* with Longuet upon us! I understand quite well that a worker of the Seine Federation, after having read the articles of Victor Méric, would get such an insane idea. His mistake must be explained to him in all tranquillity; he must be shown that this is not the question, that it is above all a question of not letting M. Longuet and consorts prepare a new betrayal in the quietness of their shelters, that they must be grabbed by the collar and compelled by force to stand before the proletariat and to answer the precise questions we put to them.

We have different methods of action, comrade Terracini tells us; we are for the revolution and they are against it. That is entirely correct, I am fully in agreement with Terracini. But if this were not the case, then the question of the united front would encounter no difficulties whatsoever. Naturally we are for the revolution and they are against it, but the proletariat has not understood this difference and we must make it clear to the workers.

Comrade Terracini replies: "But we are already doing it, we have communist cells in the unions. The unions have a very great importance. We are reaching our goal by means of propaganda."

Propaganda will not be prohibited by this conference; it is always an excellent thing, the foundation of everything. But the question is of combining and adapting it to the new conditions and the organizational rôle of the party.

Here is a small, very interesting excerpt from the speech of comrade Terracini:

"When we launched the appeal for a general action of the masses, we conquered the majority in the organizations by means of our propaganda."

"The majority" . . . and then the fine hand of the author made the slight correction "almost the majority". Another point on which we are fully agreed. But what does it mean: "almost the majority"? Both in Russian and in French, it comes down to saying the minority.

Comrades, even the majority does not yet mean the totality.

"We have the majority, we have four-sevenths of the proletariat."

But four-sevenths of the proletariat is not yet its totality: the remaining three-sevenths may yet quite well sabotage an action of the class. For they are, after all, three-sevenths of the proletariat.

And "almost the majority" is only three-sevenths of the proletariat. Now, thanks to propaganda, we have three-sevenths, but it is still necessary to win the four-sevenths. That is not an easy matter, comrade Terracini, and if one thinks that by repeating the same methods he has employed to win the three-sevenths he will win the other four, he is mistaken, because as the party grows larger, its methods must change. At

the outset, when the proletariat sees this intransigent little revolutionary group which says: "To hell with the reformists! To hell with the bourgeois state!"—it applauds and says: "Very good!" But when it sees these three-sevenths of the vanguard organized by the communists, that there is not much change in the field of discussions, of meetings, the proletariat tires of it, it tires of it and new methods are needed to show it that, now that we are a large party, we are able to participate in the immediate struggle.

And to demonstrate this, the action of the whole proletariat is necessary; this action must be guaranteed and the initiative for it must not be left to others.

When the workers say: Your revolution of tomorrow is of little matter to us! We want to fight today to preserve our 8-hour-day!—then it is we who must take the initiative in unification for today's battle.

Comrade Terracini says: "We mustn't pay much attention to the socialists. There is nothing to be done with them. But we must pay attention to the trade unions." And he adds: "There is nothing new in this. Already at the Second Congress of the Communist International, it was said, perhaps unintentionally: the split in the political parties, but unity in the trade unions." I do not understand this at all. I underlined this passage of his speech in red pencil and then in blue pencil, to express my astonishment. We said at the Second Congress, perhaps unintentionally. . . .

TERRACINI: It was in the polemic with Zinoviev. That was irony. You were not in the hall when I spoke.

TROTSKY: Let's put it aside and send it in an envelope to Victor Méric. Irony is his speciality.

INTERRUPTIONS: There's irony in Italy too, as you see. . . . And even in Moscow. . . .

TROTSKY: Unfortunately; for as you see I was misled by it. But joking aside. What does it mean: no splitting of the trade unions? And why not? The most dangerous thing in the speech of comrade Renoult, which I read with great interest and in which I found very instructive things for understanding the state of mind of the French communist party, is his assertion that at the present moment we have nothing to do not only with the dissidents but also with the reformist C.G.T. [General Confederation of Labor]. This will be a pleasant surprise to the most maladroit anarchists, if I may say so, of the Unitary C.G.T. Precisely in the trade union movement, you have applied the theory of the united front; you have applied it with success; and if you now have 300,000 members as compared with the 200,000 supporters of Jouhaux, you owe it, I am sure, in half-measure to the tactic of the united front, because, in the trade union movement, where the problem is to embrace the proletarians of all opinions, of all tendencies, there is the possibility of fighting for your immediate interests. If we were to split the trade unions in accordance with the different tendencies, it would be suicidal.

We said: No, this terrain is for us. Inasmuch as we are independent as communists, we have all the possibilities for manoeuvring, of saying openly what we think, of criticizing the others; we enter the trade unions with this conception and we are sure that within a specified time we shall have the majority behind us.

Jouhaux saw the ground slipping away from under him. Our prognosis was correct. He began the split by means of expulsions. We characterized the expulsions as a crime, for it was unity of action that was needed. That was our tactic.

INTERRUPTION: Renoult said that!

TROTSKY: To be sure, Jouhaux shattered the unity by the expulsions of the communists. That's just where the meaning of the united front lies. In our struggle against the reformists, against the dissidents, as you named them, the syndicalist-reformists, social-patriots, etc., we must make them responsible for the split, we must continually force them to express themselves on the possibility of a joint action on the basis of the class struggle. They must be faced with the necessity of stating an open "No" before the entire working class.

If the situation is favorable for the demands of the working class, we must push these gentlemen forward. In two years, let us assume, we shall have the revolution. Meanwhile, we will have an ever increasing movement of the working class. Do you think that the Jouhauxs and the Merheims will remain as they are today? No, they will always try; they will take one or two steps forward and, since there will always be people in their camp who refuse to follow them, they will experience a new split. We will profit by it. That is naturally a tactic of movement, a very flexible tactic, but at the same time a thoroughly energetic one, for the leadership remains firmly in our hands. And when great events occur—here I am fully in accord with comrade Terracini—the unity of action will be established by itself. We will not prevent it. But, comrade Terracini tells us, at the given moment there are no great events and we have no reason for proposing the united front. . . .

TERRACINI: I never said that.

TROTSKY: Perhaps I am mistaken. Perhaps it is not you who said it. But the argument was brought forward here, for I saw it in the stenogram. The French comrades say: Yes, if great events come; but if they don't come, what then? Then we must bring them about by our own initiative. I contend, and I believe it is an axiom, that one of the obstacles to great events, one of the psychological obstacles for the proletariat, is the fact that several political and trade union organizations exist side by side, the differences between which the masses do not understand; they do not see clearly how they are to realize their action. This psychological obstacle is naturally of the greatest negative significance; it is the outcome of a situation which was not created by us, but we must make it easier for the masses to understand it. We propose to an organization

this or that immediate action; this corresponds entirely to the logic of things. I contend that if the Unitary C.G.T. were to adopt the tactic of ignoring the Jouhauxist C.G.T., it will be the greatest mistake that we can commit in France. And if the party commits this mistake, it will be crushed under its weight, because the 300,000 revolutionary workers in the trade unions—and comrades, they are only a minimum—these 300,000 workers are practically your party, somewhat expanded by various elements, that's all. And where is the French proletariat?

You will reply: But they aren't with Jouhaux either! Yes, that's right. But I say that the workers who are in no organization, the most disillusioned or mentally most sluggish elements, may very well be drawn behind us at the moment of an acute revolutionary crisis, but in a dragging epoch they are much rather a prop of Jouhaux. For what does Jouhaux represent? The sluggishness of the working class. And the fact that you have no more than 300,000 workers shows that there is no little sluggishness left in the French working class, even though the French workers are indubitably superior to the backward workers of other countries.

And now once more on the question of exposing the Jouhaux. How is that to be done? In what way can we force them to express themselves about the mass actions and to take responsibility for them?

There is still another danger. If the Unitary C.G.T. simply turns its back to the reformist Confederation, and tries to win the masses by means of revolutionary propaganda, it will perhaps commit the same mistakes that the railroad union of France has already made. You know very well that the trade union movement, trade union actions, are very hard to direct. The great reserves of backward masses who are represented by Jouhaux must always be borne in mind, and if we ignore Jouhaux, it is equivalent to ignoring the masses of backward workers.

That is how the question presents itself in my eyes.

There is still another urgent question, namely, the question of the conference of the three Internationals. Comrades, it is said: The idea of working together with the people of the Second and Two-and-a-Half Internationals is a great surprise to us. We are not prepared for this idea of international collaboration with those whom we have denounced.

To be sure, it is necessary to prepare all minds in time for a turn of such scope. That is correct. The question has aroused a lively agitation. But what caused it? It was the so-called Geno Conference, which also came up very suddenly. When we received the invitation to this conference, the personal invitation to comrade Lenin, it was a surprise to us. If this conference should really take place, whether in Genoa or in Rome, it will more or less determine the destiny of the world, in so far as the bourgeoisie can do it. Then the proletariat will feel the need of doing something.

Naturally, we communists will do everything possible, by means of propaganda, of meetings, of demonstrations; but not only among communists, but also among the workers, in the working class as a whole, in Germany, in France, there is the feeling, still vague perhaps, of the need of doing something in order to acquire an influence upon the negotiations of this conference from the standpoint of the interests of the proletariat.

Now, the Two-and-a-Half International takes the initiative of a conference and invites us to attend. We must decide: yes or no? Should we answer these people: "You are traitors, we will undertake nothing in common with you"? Their treachery is a long-known fact, and it has been branded countless times. But these gentlemen will be able to say: We of the Second and Two-and-a-Half Internationals want to exercise a pressure upon the diplomatic conference of the bourgeoisie through the voice of the proletariat; we invited the communists, but they refused and answered us with abuse. And we reply: Since you are traitors, scoundrels (they will see to it that this word is expunged from the stenogram), we will not go. Of course, our communist audience will be convinced by us, for it is already convinced. We have no need to convince it over again. But the supporters of the Second and the Two-and-a-Half Internationals, among whom there are many workers? That is the only question of any importance. If you say: "No, the Mensheviks have lost all influence everywhere", then I don't worry a bit about the conferences of the Second and the Two-and-a-Half Internationals; but say so. But unfortunately, the workers who support the Second and Two-and-a-Half Internationals are more numerous than the workers who support the Third International.

The fact that must be borne in mind is that Friedrich Adler has addressed himself to us in these words: We invite you to participate in a conference which is to discuss and decide on common pressure to exert upon the bourgeoisie, upon its diplomacy. They invite us and with us the workers of the entire world. If we confine ourselves, in our reply to repeating: "You are social-traitors"—it will be a maladroit answer. The Scheidemanns, the Friedrich Adlers, Longuets *e tutti quanti* would then have an easy job in the working class. There, they will say, the communists claim that we are traitors; but when we turn to them and invite them to cooperate with us for a specific period and a well-defined purpose, they refuse. Let us, comrades, reserve this designation of traitors and scoundrels for the moment after the conference, perhaps even for the conference itself. But it is not now, in our letter of reply, that we should say: we refuse to attend because you are traitors and scoundrels. Will this conference surely take place? I do not know. There are comrades who are more optimistic about it and others who are more pessimistic. But if the conference does not succeed, then let it be exclusively because of the Scheidemanns. Then we shall be able to say to

the workers: Your Second and Two-and-a-Half Internationals are impotent to do what they themselves proposed to us. That will not only bring us the applause of the communists, but a part of the Scheidemann people will listen to us and say: There is something rotten here; an agreement was proposed and the German social-democrats did not come. Then the struggle between the Scheidemanns and ourselves will begin anew. We will conduct it upon a broader basis, one more favorable to us. That too is the only result towards which we aspire.

I do not know, comrades, if the conference can be postponed; that surely does not depend upon our wishes. It would be very important from the standpoint of preparing the minds of the workers. But this conference is being proposed to us now, before the Conference of Genoa, and we must reply.

And even if there is a worker in the Seine Federation who exclaims: "My party wants to meet with Jouhaux. No! I tear up my card!"—we will say to him: "My dear friend, you are wrought up now; have a little patience." And if he slams the door behind him, we will regret greatly his departure, but it will be his fault. Then, a few weeks later, when he will read the news of the British Conference, when he will see Cachin and the delegates of the other communist parties participating, speaking and acting as communists; then, after the conference, when the struggle continues but our opponents are more completely unmasked than before the conference—we shall have convinced him and all the other communists and, at the same time, our aim shall have been attained. That is why I believe that the conference should decide unanimously in favor of participation, not with the already ritualized appeals, but with the statement: Yes, we are ready, as representatives of the revolutionary interests of the world proletariat, faced with this new attempt of the Second and Two-and-a-Half Internationals to deceive the proletariat, to try to open its eyes to the criminal policy of these two Internationals.

Leon TROTSKY  
Moscow, February 26, 1922

THE press prints the report that Rudolph Klement, who had occupied the post of secretary of the Bureau of the Fourth International, suddenly disappeared from Paris without giving any notice to the comrades with whom he was associated. A few days after he vanished, a most suspicious letter arrived in Paris, apparently signed by him but under circumstances indicating that he must have been under duress, in which he announces his break with the Fourth International. Klement had formerly been the German secretary of Leon Trotsky and it is feared in Paris that the missing comrade was kidnapped by the G.P.U. for transportation to Barcelona where a trial against a number of Trotskyists is pending. This fear is enhanced by the fact that the peculiar letter referred to was postmarked at Perpignan, French town near Spain.

# The Real Meaning of the United Front

**D**IMITROFF'S declaration to the Seventh Congress of the C. I. in support of "united front governments", we are informed, was greeted by a stormy ovation from the assembled delegates. Speaking for a "bold and determined course toward a united front of the working class", the "helmsman of the Comintern" gave an unequivocal answer to the question he posed in his report:

"If we Communists are asked," he said, "whether we advocate the united front only in the struggle for partial demands, or whether we are prepared to share the responsibility even when it will be a question of forming a government on the basis of the united front, then we say with a full sense of our responsibility: yes, we recognize that a situation may arise in which the formation of a government of the proletarian united front, or of the anti-Fascist People's Front, will become not only possible but necessary in the interest of the proletariat. And in that case we shall declare for the formation of such a government without the slightest hesitation."

Dimitroff laid down one condition, which he considered essential for the support of such a "united front government" posed by him concretely for France: namely, that it will "carry on a real struggle against French Fascism—not in word but in deed—will carry out the program of demands of the anti-Fascist People's Front." (Emphasis mine. A.S.)

What we have presented here is not the slogan of the workers' government as a consequence of the united front policy in a revolutionary situation. It is not the idea of Soviets as the highest form of the united front under the conditions in which the proletariat enters the stage of struggle for power. No! What we have presented here is the idea of support of coalition governments. Dimitroff understood it in that sense; all the delegates to the Seventh Congress understood it in that sense, and support of coalition government has now become the declared policy of the Comintern. Wherein does this differ in content from the social democratic concept of coalition governments, aside from its form of presentation? Now it is called a "bold and determined course toward the united front of the working class".

What could then be more natural than for Dimitroff to declare also that "the interests of the class struggle of the proletariat and the success of the proletarian revolution make it imperative that there be a single party of the proletariat in each country"? Only yesterday we were told by the same authors that social democracy is the main enemy, in fact it is social-Fascism; today, the success of the proletarian revolution depends on the extension of the united front into organic unity between the two Centrist parties of Stalinism and of social democracy.

Taking his cue from the report of the "helmsman", and carrying the treacherous opportunism of the Seventh Congress to its extreme absurdity, Earl Browder found an answer to the question of welding together a "broad people's movement" in the United States. It is to extend far indeed. His only fear was that "the bourgeoisie, the top A. F. of L. bureaucracy, the Right wing socialists, many liberal bourgeois politicians, not to speak of the Hearsts, Coughlins and Longs, will do everything possible to exclude the communists from such a movement". But casting all caution aside, Browder went on to explain this new line for the United States.

"We must say clearly," he exclaimed in a vigorous outburst of his own inner conviction and enthusiasm, "yes, we will fight together with all those in the united front, for a majority in all elective bodies, local, state and national. We will support such a party

whenever and wherever it wins a majority, in taking over administrative powers, so long as it really uses these powers to protect and extend democratic liberties and advance the demands of the masses. But the masses will ask us: What will be your rôle? Will you stand aside as critics, preaching merely for a Soviet power, for which we are not ready to fight? We answer: *The communists are even prepared to participate in such a government.*" (Emphasis mine. A.S.)

All that now remains to be done by Browder's chimerical "American People's Front" is to furnish the mandate.

And what sort of a "broad people's party" does Browder propose to create? Dimitroff assures us that it will be "neither socialist nor communist". Of that we never had any doubt. But then, what will it be? Browder gives us his definition as a "lasting coalition of workers, farmers, and city middle classes, to fight against threatening economic catastrophe, against political reaction and Fascism, and against the threatening war". To be sure, this is expecting a lot from a "people's party".

Such are the estimates of the tasks of the communists, outlined by both the "helmsmen", for the present conditions of threatening economic catastrophe, political reaction, Fascism and war: Support of coalition governments and the welding together in the United States of a "broad people's party . . . a lasting coalition of workers, farmers and city middle classes". Dimitroff described these to the Seventh Congress as "cardinal questions of the united front". Cardinal questions indeed, not, however, of the united front but of the opportunist degeneracy and decomposition of the Comintern.

From its original concept, the united front as a means of proletarian unity at any given moment in the struggle against capitalism, has been perverted by the present Comintern leadership into a means of an opportunist coalition with the bourgeoisie. This is the cardinal difference between the united front policy as formulated by the Bolsheviks during the period covered by the first four Congresses and the interpretation given to it at the Seventh Congress. Fundamentally it represents a cardinal difference between the Comintern of Lenin and the Comintern of Stalin.

Not the communist parties but social democracy will be the real beneficiaries of this 180 degree turn. An enormous contribution has been made toward its further rehabilitation. What stands now in the way of the justification of all its policies and all its betrayals? Nothing so far as the Comintern is concerned. Drawing their comfort from the slogan of organic unity the leaders of the socialist parties may now appear before their own working class following as fully vindicated in all their charges against the "communist splitters". For Bolsheviks, however, the question of unity or splits is subordinated to political policy. Bolsheviks do not fight only for ideas and programs. They also draw organizational conclusions from their policy. Had not the communist party under the leadership of Lenin broken definitely and irrevocably with social democracy it could never have become the party of proletarian revolution. This was the cardinal difference with social democracy. For the revolutionary party this difference remains in full force today, only it is necessary to add, that it applies with equal potency to the Comintern of Stalin.

Nevertheless the united front policy remains as valid today as when first formulated. It takes as its point of departure the fact that in the every-day struggle against capitalism, and in so far as the vital interests of the working class are concerned, the masses realize the need for united action. If their political consciousness would develop on an even and uniform scale there would be far less difficulty in solving the problem of unity. Unfortunately that

is not the case. The class itself is not homogeneous. In the course of the class struggle, political consciousness develops unevenly; large working class sections support the bourgeois political parties, support the social democracy, or remain politically indifferent. While the revolutionary party has no interests separate and apart from the class as a whole, it can fulfill its tasks only by maintaining correct relations within the class. From this flows its duty to provide the means whereby, at each given moment, joint action against the common enemy may be made possible.

These simple objective facts present the premise for the united front policy. In no sense can it be considered a mere manoeuvre that is not meant seriously or honestly, or that is to serve as a cloak under which the party snatches leadership over masses not otherwise merited by its accomplishments. Reprehensible as this would appear, it has nevertheless been the practise of the little American Stalinists. Creation, artificially, of "rank and file committees" to give the appearance of speaking officially for the trade unions in support of the party's aims was not at all beneath them. But even more despicable and more futile—if it is possible—were their many attempts to palm off as a genuine united front a mere combination of the communist party and its auxiliary organizations, most of which represented absolutely nobody not already directly under its influence. Such practises could never win over the majority of the working class; they did not win anybody at all.

So long as the revolutionary party and its direct supporters remain a minority force within the class, even if a substantial one, the party faces the problem of connecting itself with the masses. It must turn not only to the masses but also to their organizations—especially the trade unions. Any attempts to ignore the mass organizations are ludicrous. The united front, if it is to have real meaning, must extend from organization to organization. Only agreements, mutually arrived at between the organizations, can guarantee the necessary organizational points of support and make united action possible at any given moment. Mutual agreements in struggle for specific aims presuppose also equal rights and common duties. By their very nature these aims are of a limited character for the reasons that the various organizations involved have different political programs. But they must, of course, be in accord with the historical development of the proletariat. With a correct tactic the revolutionary party has everything to gain from the united front policy. Its possibilities to win over to its side the majority of the working class become greater.

From the Stalinist zig-zags on the united front we have witnessed the exact opposite both in theory and practise, and with disastrous consequences to the working class. Most outstanding are the lessons of the terrible German débâcle, that is, for those who have the capacity to learn. As lessons they are equally devastating to the impotent theoreticians who were then, and still are today, the real "helmsmen" of the Comintern, regardless of which one of the henchmen holds the official title. In its deadly crisis the working class was told that the united front, although permissible before, had now become counter-revolutionary. "A bloc, or even an alliance, or even a temporary joint operation in individual actions between the communist party and the social democratic party in Germany against National-Socialism", the C.P. leaders declared to be impermissible, for had not the social democrats been pronounced to be "social-Fascists"? Stalin's definition of social democracy they held to be "unexcelled in its exactness and incisiveness". Stalin had declared to the Comintern: "The social democracy is objectively the moderate wing of Fascism. These organizations do not negate one another, but rather supplement each other. They are not antipodes but twins."

The fate of the German working class, however, depended at that crucial hour on the ability of the workers' organizations to hammer together a united front of defense against Fascism. Social

democracy was still the largest working class party; it also exerted the decisive influence in the trade unions. Of course, its leadership had betrayed the workers. But to the workers, who followed them, this had not yet been made sufficiently clear, nor were they ready to entrust their fate to the communist party leadership. With its criminal attitude and viciously false policies, how could this be expected? The ultimatic demands by the latter, that the workers desert their organizations and accept in advance the communist party leadership, which was put forward as a substitute for the united front by mutual agreement, only made matters worse. It had in no way demonstrated its right to leadership. And thus, to the betrayals of the social democratic leaders, it could only add its own criminal capitulation to Fascism—an equally dastardly betrayal.

The rôle of social democracy and of its leadership was perfectly well known when the united front policy was formulated. It was taken into account in a very direct sense. But the accredited officials of the various workers' organizations, whether reformist or outright reactionaries, cannot be ignored or excluded at will so long that they are recognized by the masses as their leaders. Were it possible simply to unite the masses around the banner of the revolutionary party, regardless of their organizations and without their leaders, there would be no need of presenting the united front in this form. But that is not possible; and the revolutionary party must therefore turn also to the leaders in order to confront them with the real issues of the class struggle. Even negotiations with them become obligatory. To bring them out into the open and oppose them under equal conditions of the struggle before the eyes of the masses is one important purpose of the united front. Given a correct tactic, all the advantages belong to the revolutionary party. A movement in action affords the best possibilities to reveal to the masses, by their own experience, the real character and the downright sabotage of the struggle by the reactionary leaders.

Such an attitude was called counter-revolutionary during the crucial hours in Germany. A few years before, the Stalinist bureaucrats had burned their fingers on the Anglo-Russian Committee, which they palmed off as a united front. Secretly it was conceived as a lasting coalition, which would guarantee peaceful relations with British imperialism while building socialism in the Soviet Union. Thus falsely motivated, on purely pacifist grounds, it could not serve as means to confront the leaders of the British Trade Union Congress with the real problems of imperialist aggression. It turned out to be a bloc pure and simple with the top leaders and not with the mass organizations, the trade unions, for they were engaged in a general strike and betrayed by their leaders. The mutual agreement in the bloc served to bolster up these leaders acting as agents of the British government against the masses. The British Trade Union Congress could turn its weapons with redoubled force against the general strike. But the discipline and "unity" of the bloc remained after the betrayal. Therein lay its real crime.

The united front, when correctly carried out, imposes, of course, a certain discipline of action on the revolutionists. But woe to them if this discipline takes on an absolute character. It is always essential for the revolutionary party to maintain its political and organizational independence. It must reserve for itself the right of criticism and freedom of action which must be mutually guaranteed for all participants in the united front.

For social democrats this problem resolves itself into non-aggression pacts, that is when they cannot escape the pressure for united action. Otherwise they have consistently rejected the idea of fighting alongside of revolutionary workers, for the sake of maintaining their coalition with the bourgeoisie. Non-aggression pacts they construe to mean cessation of all attacks upon their position and actions. In reality such a concept flies in the face of the very

principle of mutual rights of criticism and freedom of action. It becomes a cheap subterfuge for the united front under cover of which they aim to keep the revolutionists within certain bounds while they may continue unhampered their deception of the masses.

Revolutionists cannot bind themselves to such agreements. Moreover, once the united front is established and any of its participants, especially the reactionary leaders, take a position detrimental to the movement or its objectives and contrary to the desires of the masses, the revolutionary party can no longer consider itself bound by its discipline. In that event it reserves for itself the right to break off all relations and carry the struggle to its conclusion regardless of these participants. The failure to break off relations with the British trade union leaders in the Anglo-Russian Committee, after the general strike betrayal, was the cardinal mistake of the Stalinists in this episode.

The Seventh Congress policy, submitted in the name of the united front, is similar in its pacifist motivation to that of the Anglo-Russian Committee, but much more full blown in its social democratic objective consequences. Let us consider the proposals for a "lasting coalition of workers, farmers and city middle classes" in a "People's Front" party, and of one single proletarian party for each country. Assuming that the one single party of the proletariat is established, what will be the need of the "broad people's party"? What duty is it to perform? We are not informed at all by the authors of the proposals. For revolutionists these two kinds of parties would be mutually exclusive. Granting the possibility of the former, there would be no need of the latter. But to the authors of the proposals they evidently mean the same thing; not a united front, not a revolutionary party at all, but a complete dissolution into one "broad people's party". Social democracy, even in its palmiest days, could go no further along the road of opportunism.

A united front of correct relations with the middle class for specific and limited aims can, of course, not be ruled out in advance. It is possible and necessary under certain conditions; but it can advance the interests of the working class, and the interests of humanity, only when the proletarian foundation is guaranteed and its leadership made possible. Between the two decisive classes in bourgeois society the petty bourgeoisie vacillates and is unable to play an independent rôle. At best it swings, according to its own economic fortunes, to the support of the one or the other. Naturally it constitutes a reservoir of potential proletarian allies, especially as its economic rations, due to the decline of capitalism, get reduced to the proletarian level. But this also presupposes the condition of a firm leadership given by the proletariat in showing the petty bourgeoisie the socialist way out of its dilemma.

A united front with the petty bourgeoisie on any other basis would be a grotesque absurdity, if not actually disastrous in objective consequence.

Is this absurdity to be repeated on a grander scale in the projected "broad people's movement" in the United States—a purely Third party movement? If so, and no other construction can be

put upon it, we repeat it will have far more disastrous consequences to the American working class. In its further advance to revolutionary consciousness, aided by the maturing of capitalist contradictions, it will face the Third party as an obstacle, whose historic rôle can be none other than to pacify, to deceive and to disintegrate the advancing working class movement.

Nothing need now stand in the way of organic unity between the two Centrist parties of Stalinism and social democracy. Fundamentally their position is the same. But what new possibilities would this offer to the working class, if any? This is the essential question. Of course, a revolutionary basis of unification between two Centrist parties is precluded in advance. The mere unification solves nothing and carries rather the danger of stifling and crushing a very promising Leftward development under the juggernaut of the combined bureaucracies.

At the present moment this question is presented concretely in France where it runs through the "People's Front" to the proposed coalition government so vociferously acclaimed in Moscow. Essentially all rests on the same foundation. Its foundation is not distinguishable by a hair's-breadth from that of social democracy on its fatal August 4, 1914. That day is marked in the pages of working class history in bold letters—betrayal. With the crucial hour nearing, the hour of Fascism and war, which puts all political groups and parties to their supreme test, the question of policy pursued becomes the basic consideration. And while Fascism is marshalling its forces, the Stalinists, in harmony with the social democratic leaders, are preparing to cement a united front, not of the working class, but with the bourgeois political state in the form of a coalition government. The position of both parties is "civil peace"; not "battles between Frenchmen", but the "union of France"; not the struggle for the death against Fascism, which means the struggle for power, but "national recovery". This, in essence, is already the program of the "People's Front", which the Seventh Congress insisted be the condition for support of a coalition government in France. Such are the fruits of Stalinism today: misleading, disorienting, disarming and paralyzing the working masses.

Neither party finds the enemy in its own country. Both are committed to the policy of national defense, the defense of French imperialism, as summed up in the Franco-Soviet pact. On the occasion of affixing the signatures to the pact, *l'Humanité* wrote: "What could be more natural than the fact that our comrade Stalin, upon the request of Laval, should have declared his approval of France's military measures?" This is Stalin's political solidarization with the brigands of imperialism. And upon this basis organic unity is to be consummated and is to find its synthesis in the projected coalition government.

From its original concept, the united front, as a means of proletarian unity at any given moment in its struggle against capitalism, has been perverted by the degenerate policy of Stalinism into a coalition with the bourgeoisie.

Arne SWABECK

# The People's Front in France

**T**HE CENTER of gravity of the international class struggle is today located in France. There too the democratic constitutional form of government has begun to shake, the governments have a continually briefer term of life, parliament falls into increasing discredit, the number of unemployed rises from month to month, the steadily deepening agrarian crisis threatens countless peasants with ruin, despair spreads among the urban petty bourgeois strata—to all of which is being added the frightful pressure of the immediate war danger. The masses are seeking a way out they enter into movements, mass demonstrations, strikes. Armed disputes, guerrilla battles between Fascists and sections of the labor movement have left their mark on the inner-political picture of France for the last two years. All these are unmistakable signs of the fact that the period of the stable, “pacifist”, constitutional-democratic development of France has finally passed. Ever more threateningly is the French nation confronted with the Either-Or: the smashing of capitalism, the victory of the revolutionary proletariat and the establishment of its dictatorship, thereby opening a new chain of revolutions in Europe, or the victory of the extreme reaction in its most horrible, revolting form, the victory over the labor movement and all democracy of those sections

of the petty bourgeoisie and the slum proletariat which have been infuriated to the utmost, who are most decayed—a victory whose fruits fall into the lap of monopoly capitalism and which flings back the entire nation to the ideological state of despotic barbarism, a victory which strengthens the existence of the already functioning Fascist states and draws other lands into its orbit (Belgium, Holland, Spain, Switzerland).

The serious observer of French politics, who desires the victory of the French proletariat, is therefore faced with answering the following questions: Is the French proletariat conscious of the import of this decisive struggle: Are its organizations pursuing such a policy which would make a victory probable? Have the French workers' parties drawn the lessons of the terrible proletarian defeats of the last decade? Numerous are the voices which reply affirmatively by referring to the “People's Front”. For does not this People's Front realize not only the proletarian united front, but also the united front of the proletariat with the petty bourgeoisie? Let us therefore see what is actually involved in this “People's Front” which can already look back upon more than a year's history.



against the Versailles peace. The C.P.G. later liquidated these teachings and competed with Hitler in the struggle against the "shameful peace of Versailles". And today the C.P.F. concludes an alliance with its bourgeoisie for the defense of the *status quo* of Versailles!

Such foreign political aims bring obligations. And not the least reason why the French bourgeoisie follows this policy is that it hopes, by means of it, to keep the proletariat off its neck.<sup>2</sup> Clémenceau would not have dared to dream that his successors would succeed in playing the October Revolution against the proletarian revolution in France! To be sure, this required tremendous reactionary changes in the Soviet Union itself, the Soviet Union of Lenin and Trotsky first had to become the Soviet Union of Stalin-Napoleon and his marshals.

But let us look a little closer into the domestic political activity of the People's Front. The world public first paid it attention on July 14 of last year, the French national holiday, when a committee composed of Radicals, socialists and "communists" summoned the masses to demonstrate; when the three party leaders, Daladier, Blum and Cachin, led the demonstration arm in arm; when the tricolor waved for the first time in a workers' demonstration, and when M. Duclos, general secretary of the C.P.F., intoned the *Marseillaise* on the *Place de la République*. Shortly thereafter occurred those events which made the true character of the People's Front even plainer. We refer to the spontaneous strikes, demonstrations and struggles in Brest and Toulon. Involved in this was the first spontaneous resistance of the proletarian masses to the hunger-decrees of the Laval-Herriot government. In order not to lose lightly the favor of the Radicals, sworn supporters of private property in the means of production, the Stalinists and socialists bluntly declared the resistance of the proletariat to be a Fascist provocation. And thus may the whole content of the People's Front policy be defined: subservience of the workers' parties to the Radicals. This subservience reached its low point in the vote given the Sarraut government, which is not even a purely Radical government, but one which includes such outspokenly Right wing bourgeois forces as Flandin, the Minister of War, General Maurin, the member of the Board of Directors of the Schneider-Creusot munitions works, etc.

Naturally, this policy has another side. It is not so easy to bring the proletarian masses under the leadership of the Radicals. For the S.P., and above all for the C.P., the essential task is therefore the duping of the masses into the belief that their policy is in harmony with the teachings of Marx and Lenin, that they continue to pursue the goal of the proletarian revolution. Were they to liquidate Marxism in words as well as in practise (which is what the Neo-Socialists proposed in their time), the masses would quit the C.P. and the S.P. and build themselves a new party. But by that the Blums, Cachins and Thorezes would lose all their value both for the French bourgeoisie and for Stalin-Bonaparte, who uses them as payments. That is why they clothe their treacherous policy towards the bourgeoisie in formulæ taken from the vocabu-

lary of Leninism, even combat "Millerandism" (coalition government) in words, and seek in the works of Marx and Lenin for any quotation that they can tear from its context and give a patriotic content.

It would lead too far afield to pillory here all the distortions of Leninism. Especially, of course, must Lenin's writing against the ultra-Leftists, the "infantile maladies", serve to justify opportunism. Even at the periphery of our own organization, voices have risen to express the idea that there is a contradiction between our rejection of the People's Front policy in France and our proposal to support the Evangelical churches and the Catholic church in Germany against Nazi totality-barbarism. Let us answer both the Stalinists and our own doubting "friends" with one single quotation from the *Infantile Malady*:

"Everything depends upon whether one understands how to apply this tactic [of the united front and of veering] for the raising and not for the lowering of the *general* level of proletarian class consciousness, of the revolutionary spirit, of the capacity to fight and win."

On July 14, 1935 there were only isolated Tricolors in the demonstration parade of the People's Front, and the red flag predominated by far. In the People's Front demonstration of February 16, 1936, on the contrary, the police of Sarraut—as he himself reported proudly to the Chamber—counted 450-500 Tricolors. The *lowering* of the general class consciousness by the tactic of the People's Front expresses itself here in the proportional relationship to the increasing of Tricolors. As for the church struggle in Germany, contrariwise, it is a task of the revolutionists to support every resistance to the totality-barbarism of the Fascists and thereby to raise the general level of the revolutionary spirit and the capacity to struggle. Whoever does not understand how to apply the Lenin quotation adduced here, has not yet learned the A B C of revolutionary politics.

It has even occurred to the German S.A.P. to quote the shade of Lenin of 1905 in favor of the admissibility of the People's Front. In an article on the People's Front, *Neue Front* wrote at the beginning of October, 1935:

"The first question that rises in this connection is whether such an alliance, such a fighting community with parts of the bourgeoisie, is at all possible and admissible from the principled revolutionary standpoint. We affirm this and thereby solidarize ourselves with what the Bolsheviks under Lenin's leadership put forth as far back [!] as 1905-1906 on the admissibility and the limitations of such alliances."

One could not jump around more unscrupulously and criminally with the heritage of Lenin. In 1905, Lenin shared the general conception that Russia was on the eve of a great bourgeois revolution. Contrary to the Mensheviks, however, who concluded from this conception that the proletariat should leave the leadership of this revolution to the liberal bourgeoisie, Lenin was of the opinion that only the proletariat, in league with the revolutionary peasantry, could solve the tasks of the bourgeois revolution. That is why he condemned sharply any marching together with the radical bourgeoisie (this is just the question over which the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks split), but by means of the formula "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry" he held open the door to an accord with the peasant Social Revolutionists, whose program was the bourgeois agrarian revolution. Let it be borne in mind that the Russian liberals were at that time still under the knout of the Czar and in spite of this Lenin categorically rejected any alliances with them. The French Radicals of today, on the other hand, who have everything in common with the liberals and nothing in common with the peasant-terroristic Social Revolutionists and who,

<sup>2</sup> Flandin, the national-liberal foreign minister of the Sarraut government, seeks to explain to the extreme Right wing the change of the communists in the following words: "But if accidentally . . . a closer community of views and in action on the plane of foreign policy and for the preservation of peace in Europe between France which is, despite all, the heir of the Rev-

olution of 1789 [Applause from the Left and the extreme Left] and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, leads the leaders and members of the communist party to a patriotic conception and action of national solidarity, then I do not believe, gentlemen, that you will be the last to felicitate yourselves." (Flandin, speech in the Chamber, Feb. 25, 1936.)

in contrast to the latter, base themselves upon an agrarian revolution effected some 150 years ago, are the representatives of French colonial oppression. But the S.A.P. nevertheless does not fail to adduce the position of Lenin in 1905 (which was, moreover, thrown to the junk pile in his April 1917 theses) as a motivation for the People's Front policy. It can be seen from this example that the S.A.P. has as much in common with Leninism as quack-healing has with scientific medicine.

But back to the People's Front, as it lives and breathes in France today. The decisive question is: what perspective does it have, does it at all want to conquer power and if so, in what way and how does it aim to employ it? The People's Front has a majority in the present French parliament, which will probably be increased after the coming elections. What, then, is more logical than that it should form the government? Do not the "communists" too place themselves on the foundation of the bourgeois state in France, don't they demand of it the dissolution of the Fascist organizations, don't they make themselves the defenders of the security of the state in the "program of the People's Front"—a miserable document which does not even dare demand the immediate abolition of the Laval emergency decrees and which proposes a . . . parliamentary investigation commission for the colonies? Now, if the present bourgeois state can wipe out Fascism, if this phenomenon can be eliminated without eliminating its cause—capitalism, and petty bourgeois misery engendered by its crisis—and if this is the avowed purpose of the People's Front, then why don't the communists participate in the government? After all, it is to be expected that the laws against the Fascists would be applied more resolutely by People's Front ministers than by Right wing bourgeois ministers, who are half- or whole-hearted allies of the Fascists. This conclusion was indeed drawn in the last ministerial crisis by the social democrats, who declared themselves ready to form a government in the event that the communists also participated. Yet the communists refused, and they suddenly raised against Blum, the socialist leader, the accusation of "Millerandism", of class-collaboration! "Respect for the principles of traditional socialism demands the rejection of participation in the government," declares Duclos, in *l'Humanité*, who is suddenly concerned with traditional socialism but not with the proletarian revolution. What is this to mean? The communists, who boast every day of being the initiators of the People's Front, the communists, who still speak of their Radical "friends" in *l'Humanité*, the communists, who give their votes in the Chamber to Sarraut (when Sarraut put the question of confidence for the first time, the communists abstained from voting; the second time—after the Fascist assault on Leon Blum—they were already voting for Sarraut), these communists suddenly accuse the social democrats—who have never been ought but Millerandists—of Millerandism! Ah, but these gentlemen are masters of deceit! They know that, in ministerial positions, they will be unable to go any further than the Radicals, i.e., the bourgeoisie, permit them to go, that they will be unable to realize a single proletarian demand, that they will not even be able to dissolve the Fascist leagues in reality—and not merely on paper. They therefore postpone the taking over of power by the People's Front in accordance with the formula coined by Dimitroff at the Seventh Congress (which gained the applause of the S.A.P., moreover) with regard to the time: "When the state apparatus of the bourgeoisie is already sufficiently disorganized and paralyzed so that the bourgeoisie is incapable of preventing the formation of a government of struggle against reaction and Fascism." Since the days of Marx and Engels, but above all since Lenin's time, it has always been taken for granted by communists that a disorganization and paralyzing of the bourgeois state appa-

ratus is the signal for the armed uprising of the proletariat. But in the era of Stalin-Dimitroff-Thorez, all the formulæ out of the vocabulary of Leninism acquire a positively treacherous content. How is the bourgeois state apparatus to be disorganized and paralyzed if the People's Front policy of the workers' parties renounces any attack upon this state apparatus? If the communists for the sake of the friendship between the General Staff and Moscow, give up all propaganda in the army? If the workers' parties most resolutely resist the arming of the proletariat and stab in the back any strike that breaks out on the pretext that it is a "Fascist provocation"? In reality, the Dimitroff formula—which is chewed and re-chewed by the journalists of *l'Humanité* in one form or another—conceals the greatest betrayal imaginable, the betrayal of the German social democracy in 1918-1919. That is, should proletarian mass uprisings occur despite the treacherous policy of the S.P. and C.P., which would paralyze the bourgeois state apparatus, then the "communists", together with the social democrats and the bourgeois Radicals would form the "People's Front government" in order to save the state apparatus and to restore "law and order".

The objection will be raised by those who let themselves be blinded by the election successes of the People's Front: All this may be true, yet the People's Front is preventing the victory of Fascism in France. This is an illusion which Marx characterized as "parliamentary cretinism". The successes of the People's Front are sham successes in the truest sense of the word. If the People's Front has at its disposal nothing but ballots and empty fists, the Fascists, on the other hand, are not so naive. Here you find revolvers, carbines, machine guns, and even flying squadrons. Colonel la Rocque is preparing the civil war in the most modern style. The *Croix de Feu* already represents a tremendous civil war force. And while the workers' parties abandon all agitation in the army, the Fascists do not abandon their agitation among the officers. Let the People's Front wallow in its sham successes, let it succumb to the illusion that the bourgeois state will cut off one of its own legs—the Fascist civil war troops—but the Fascists are preparing for their hour. And the workers, doped by the People's Front tactic, will confront them without arms or defense. In great social crises, disputed questions are no longer settled with ballots, but with cannons, machine guns and airplanes. The bourgeoisie and the Fascists are preparing for this dispute, while the S.F.I.O. and the C.P.F. are disarming the proletariat by their People's Front policy. The end can only be a catastrophe.

Fortunately, a force is rising in France which sees this picture clearly before its eyes. The Bolshevik-Leninist group and the Revolutionary Socialist Youth which is closely connected with it, are conducting a sharp struggle against the policy of class fraternization, against the alliance with the Radicals, for the formation of proletarian unity committees (Soviets), for preparing the general strike, for the arming of the proletariat, for the building up of a new revolutionary party. They have at their disposal today but a few thousand organized supporters. But their ranks are consolidating daily. Closely connected with the masses, they are fighting inside the People's Front against the policy of the People's Front. In the demonstration of February 16, they were the only ones who poured a drop of wormwood into the toasting goblet of the government head, Sarraut. Their slogan was: "Down with the Sarraut government!" The latter complained about it in parliament and *l'Humanité*, loyal to the régime, characterized our comrades as "provocateurs".

The fate of France—which means of Europe, under present conditions—depends for the next decade upon whether this vanguard, the French section of the Fourth International, will succeed

in bringing decisive masses under its influence in time, and in giving a different turn to events. Never has history put before a small vanguard, dependent exclusively upon its own strength, a more tremendous and harder task.

We German emigrants have still another word to say about the French situation. At the 8th Congress of the French C.P. which took place a few weeks ago, Thorez—whose secretaries are apparently busy digging up Marx and Lenin quotations that can be abused in a patriotic spirit—quoted the concluding sentence from Marx's criticism of Hegel's *Rechtsphilosophie*:

"If all the internal conditions are fulfilled, the day of the German resurrection will be heralded by the crowing of the Gallic cock."

Let us answer Thorez that we—like the Bolsheviks who decisively

rejected the aid of the Hohenzollerns, offered by traitors à la Scheidemann, in the struggle against Czarism—renounce the aid of French imperialism in the struggle against Hitler barbarism. Should our French comrades, however, succeed in leading the French proletariat to victory, in establishing the new Commune, then the quotation from Marx again acquires its deep revolutionary sense, then the crowing of the Gallic cock will herald the resurrection day of German freedom. And above the ruins of the Hitler Realm and of French imperialism will rise the red banner of the Fourth International.

Walter HELD

COPENHAGEN, March 4, 1936.

## Workers Front and Popular Front

AFTER AN absence of five months I found a Popular Front apparently more solid than ever, ratified by universal suffrage after more than a year of the exercise of power, consolidated by the cantonal elections at the beginning of October in which all the political parties composing it gained something while the conservative parties registered setbacks and the pro-fascist formations of La Rocque and Doriot rallied only a tiny number of voters.

That's the appearance. The reality is quite different. The Popular Front still is in power but it maintains itself there only on the condition of renouncing its program on every point, of submitting more each day to the pressure of the adversary and of yielding to it constantly and openly.

Parallely, and this is much more serious, the Workers' Front, after its important victories of May-June 1936, finds itself reduced to the defensive. The dash which impelled it has progressively diminished. It is now the employers' organizations that attack and before this counter-offensive which was easy to foresee the workers are poorly defended by their trade union organizations. The gains of the past year have already been broken through at more than one point. When they seek to defend them by the strike, which is their only weapon in the long run, they collide regularly with

the government, which is still one of the Popular Front and which the socialists and Stalinists support with their votes on every occasion.

The distinction between Popular Front and Workers' Front may seem arbitrary. It is rarely that they are distinguished or that the question is thus put; still more rarely that they are counterposed. Yet this distinction expresses the real situation; it is not formulated this way but the events themselves show it up and as they unroll they render it increasingly visible. It already manifests itself in the growing discontent of the workers towards a policy whose pernicious consequences they feel directly.

In order to be oriented in a fairly complicated situation, the political and social agitation of the recent years must be briefly summarized.

The Popular Front movement was born of the miscarried insurrection fomented by the conservative parties and the pro-fascist leagues on February 6, 1934. What exactly did this street action and the attempted assault upon the Palais-Bourbon represent? What did the men who unleashed them want? Simply to drive from power the Radicals and to take revenge, even by a rising, for the elections that had been unfavorable to them? Or did they have a program, a plan, a new governmental crew

ready to install a dictatorial or fascistic régime? To this day it is still hard to say. But I am, for my part, absolutely convinced that what was involved was nothing more than the overturning by violence of the verdict of universal suffrage—a repetition of the operation successfully realized in 1926 by the launching of a financial panic which compelled Herriot to yield power to Poincaré. The big bourgeoisie does not want to see the Radical petty bourgeoisie installed in power. But the form which the action of its leagues assumed this time—a rising against the parliament and, it seems, against the republican institutions—alarmed the country as a whole; the provinces replied spontaneously to the Parisian rising; everywhere the workers, the small peasants, the artisans, the petty functionaries mobilized by themselves in order to organize the resistance. It was a repetition of the crises through which the Third Republic has passed since its establishment: the 16th of May in 1876-1877, Boulangism in the early '90s; the Dreyfus affair of 1898-1900: the "reds" against the "whites", the old political struggle colored this time by the fascist threat. A spontaneous union occurred in the ranks, desired by the workers who no longer have confidence in the Third International. The amazing capers of the Stalinists, leaping suddenly from the

The French People's Front is composed of the (parliamentarily) strongest bourgeois party, the Radical Socialists, the socialist and communist parties, plus the trade unions and a number of small Left wing bourgeois groupings. The Radical party deserves, at the outset, a more detailed consideration, for its essence reflects the whole People's Front. The Radical Socialist party proclaims itself the heir of the Great French Revolution, and so it is in the sense that it has always loyally served the class of the bourgeoisie and its state which emerged victoriously from this revolution. Only, times have meanwhile changed, and with them also people. The bourgeoisie which fought against oppressive feudalism and absolutism became, many generations ago, the oppressive imperialist bourgeoisie. And whom doesn't the French bourgeoisie oppress! Indonesians, Arabs, Berbers, Riff Kabyls, Negroes, Indians, etc., as well as proletarians and the lower strata of the petty bourgeoisie of the country itself, are given a taste of the harsh fist of the victor of 1789. In harmony with the altered character of the bourgeoisie, the Radical party has become one of its most corrupt instruments of domination. The party, by means of its verbose glorification of the Great Revolution in economically peaceful times, did have its hands above all on the petty bourgeois and the peasant, yet without representing the present-day or the future interests of the lower layers of these classes. That is why the latter inexorably developed an antagonism towards it during the crisis.

Let us outline here in a few strokes the recent history of the Radical party. During the World War, its lust for annexation knew no bounds. Not even the demand for the withdrawal from the left bank of the Rhine sufficed for it. It signed the Versailles Treaty with a complete sense of responsibility, and at the beginning, it likewise supported the policy of the occupation of the Ruhr. In 1925 it was a Radical government which conducted the shameful colonial war in Morocco and the present "Radical" government of Sarraut is giving the insurrectionary people of Syria doses of grapeshot. The domestic rôle of the Radicals is no less glorious. The same Sarraut was Minister of the Interior in the Doumergue cabinet after the miserable capitulation of the likewise Radical Daladier government to the Fascist stroke on February 6, 1934. On February 9, several thousand communist workers rallied in Paris for a counter-demonstration; M. Sarraut's police fired into their ranks; results, five dead. And M. Paganon, the "Radical" Minister of the Interior of the Laval government followed in Sarraut's footsteps: more workers' blood was shed by the Radicals in Brest and Toulon in the Summer of 1935. It has come to the point where the party is involved in virtually all the corruption scandals of the Third Republic, which constitute the perennial agitational material of the Fascists and royalists against the parliamentary system. That was the case as far back as the end of the last century. In a letter to Kautsky, Engels wrote on January 28, 1889: "The Radicals, in their haste to get into the government, have made themselves the slaves of opportunism and corruption and thereby fairly nurtured Boulangism." Things are no better to this day; they have grown worse, as the Stavisky affair, above all, plainly showed.

The increasingly profound crisis is confronted by the Radical government members with the methods of capitalism: radical wage and salary reductions, enormous rise in direct and indirect taxes, hitting the lower strata primarily. At the same time, the military apparatus swallows up increasingly vast sums of money. The little man consequently feels himself betrayed by the Radicals (and rightly so). He seeks a new way out. Thence the swelling of the ranks of the *Croix de Feu* and other Fascist societies, thence also the communist election successes. If, recently, this process has been weakened or, more correctly, has taken place mainly to the

benefit of the Right, then it is precisely a result of the People's Front policy which once more elevates the Radicals on the shield of the nation.

Before the outbreak of the present crisis, the so-called "Left Cartel" existed in France, the parliamentary coöperation of the Radicals and the socialists. One of the effects of the crisis was the belief among the socialists that they could no longer submit to the policy of the Radicals. In order not to lose contact with the proletarian masses, the socialists called off the alliance with the Radicals and even parted with their own Right wing—the so-called Neos—who held firmly to the alliance. The S.F.I.O. oriented towards the proletarian united front. Meanwhile the Comintern buried the theory of social-Fascism, and the united front came into being. However, it soon became clear that the C.P.F., under the command of the degenerated Soviet bureaucracy, had not accomplished a turn to Leninism but to ultra-opportunism. Encirclement by Hitler Germany and Japan compelled the Soviet Union to look about for foreign allies. It found one, along the lines already prescribed by Czarist foreign policy, in the French General Staff, which is interested in preserving the *status quo* created by the Versailles Treaty—so favorable to French imperialism—which fears Hitler's lust for vengeance, and is therefore likewise for restoring the constellation of 1914.<sup>1</sup> Upon the French communists fell the task of making this alliance popular among the French people. Towards this end it had to extend the united front to the Radicals. In the beginning, only the Left wing of the Radicals understood what new possibilities were opened up for liberalism by such a policy, whereas the Right wing continued to deem a collaboration with the communists, on the basis of their past, as "disreputable". Recently, however, this wing also has convinced itself of the "sincerity" of the patriotic turn of the communists. The recently held congress of the Radical party almost unanimously accepted the People's Front. Covered by communist authority, the socialists are also taking the road back—and not without a sigh of relief, for they had been treading shifting ground. In the People's Front, the old republican Cartel—expanded by a communist tail—celebrates a happy primordial existence. This is the People's Front and its real content.

The foreign political program of the People's Front consists in the propagation of the Franco-Russian alliance and the promotion of the "system of collective security pacts" (the expression "military alliance" is generally forbidden nowadays) within the "framework of the League of Nations". The French social democrats and communists have just voted in the French parliament for the ratification of the Franco-Russian military pact, thereby assuming the obligation to march on the side of the French bourgeoisie for the preservation of the French Empire in a coming war—if it fulfills the pre-conditions of the pact. Lenin once combatted—even though he was himself an irreconcilable opponent of the Versailles peace conditions—the National-Bolshevism of Laufenberg and comrades, who considered a "united front" of the German proletariat with the German bourgeoisie permissible in the struggle

<sup>1</sup> There is no question, in the French-Soviet alliance, of a policy which the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie "imposes" upon the bourgeoisie, as many theoreticians would have it. This policy has its advocates in the furthest circles of finance capital and of the extreme Right. The big financier, Mercier, former commander of the Fascist

*Croix de Feu*, took a trip to the Soviet Union and declared, on his return, in a lecture to the Polytechnical School: "France must declare, in close and complete accord with England that she will resist any attack upon the Soviet Union, strengthen the League of Nations and reinforce the bonds with the Little Entente and Austria."

Third Period—the direct struggle for the seizure of power—to the simple defense of bourgeois democracy, cemented the Popular Front by solidly welding the workers to it. “Anti-fascism” provided a convenient propaganda slogan and an even better electoral weapon, which guaranteed easy successes and the triumph of the Popular Front in the legislative elections of May 1936. A Popular Front government was then constituted, the leadership of which was demanded by the party that elected the largest number of candidates: the Blum ministry was set up.

But the ascent to power of Blum occurred under absolutely exceptional conditions. The workers did not confine themselves to voting for the candidates of the Popular Front. Right in the midst of the electoral agitation, they launched a potent strike movement which, beginning in the Paris region and the metal plants, very rapidly spread throughout the country and to all the industries, the big plants and the small. And no ordinary strikes, but strikes conducted under the new form of occupying the plants. The employers had profited by the economic crisis to impose upon the workers substantial wage reductions and harsh working conditions; in the textile industry, for example, a daily wage of less than 20 francs was the rule rather than the exception. Here too the movement began with the rank and file. In the metallurgical industry of the Paris region, where the first strikes were launched, the percentage of unionized workers was very small. The militancy of the workers had been aroused by the reactionary riot of February 6 and developed by the rodomontades of Colonel de la Rocque and his *Croix de Feu*, by the frequent mobilization of his well-disciplined troops at various points of the country. In turn, they profited by favorable new conditions created by a substantial program of new armaments: the industrialists were crammed with government orders that had to be filled rapidly.

It is this specifically labor action that assured the workers the 40-hour week, paid vacations, shop delegates, collective agreements allowing everywhere substantial increases of wages, above all of those that were shamefully low. The Blum cabinet confined itself to recording in the labor legislation the gains already realized in fact. The bills it submitted to the parliament were adopted virtually without discussion. The Senate, particularly retrograde in matters of social legislation and hostile, by its very make-up, to workers' demands, voted without discussion for what the government proposed out of fear of worse; the Senators were trembling, literally and not only figuratively. The trade union heads, Stalinists as well as friends of Jouhaux, had a hard job to make the workers accept compromise settlements, the strikers demanding the full acceptance of their demands.

This point must be insisted on. It is by their own action, by their direct action, by the occupation of the factories, that the workers gained the great reforms mentioned above and obtained substantial wage

increases. But the Popular Front attributed them to itself, inscribed them on its credit side and more particularly, inside the Popular Front, on the credit side of the Léon Blum cabinet. In fact, the governments of the Popular Front were not only not going to consolidate the gains but their policy was to have the exclusive effect of taking back some of them indirectly—the rises in wages by the devaluations of the currency and the rise in the cost of living—and of compromising others.

The cantonal elections at the beginning of October were to provide a very valuable general indication of the state of mind of the whole population towards the Popular Front and towards its policy as experienced in sixteen months of governmental action. As I said at the outset, they were a success for all the parties belonging to the Popular Front—a result all the more important and significant because the mode of balloting peculiar to these elections greatly favors the country as against the city: one councillor per canton, be it rural with a few thousand inhabitants, or industrial with tens of thousands. Another fact no less important: the real victors were the socialists. The Radicals gained in votes but lost several seats. The Stalinists, who had till then penetrated the cantonal assemblies with the greatest difficulty—especially because the last general elections had taken place while they were still in the “Third Period”—quadrupled their very small number of councillors, which makes it possible for them to try to cover up their defeat. Only, the defeat was definite and too obvious to be dissimulated; their few successes were absolutely out of proportion to the enormous efforts they made, the great sums of money they spent, the means they employed to pick up votes at any price, the most typical of which was the slogan: *Votez français!*—which confused them with the candidates of La Rocque or Doriot. Of *Votez communiste!* there was no longer a sign. Not only the incontestable victory reserved to the socialists but the very dimensions of this victory surprised everybody—the socialist leaders included. In point of fact, it was thought that the socialist candidates would suffer from the wear upon their leaders in the government, above all from the manner in which Léon Blum, since the month of March, had capitulated to the bourgeoisie by proclaiming the need of a “breathing spell” in the workers' actions, with the aggravation that four months later he accepted defeat without struggle, consenting, under the brutal injunction of the reactionary Senate, to concede the direction of the ministry to the Radicals, to allow Georges Bonnet to be brought from Washington as minister of Finance, a position of primary importance under the present circumstances. Georges Bonnet was openly a right wing Radical, belonging to the group of Radicals basically hostile to the Popular Front. His first concern was to destroy progressively and systematically the timid reforms accomplished by his socialist successor, Vincent Auriol. It was a matter of reassuring and tranquillizing the bourgeoisie of restoring its confidence

The socialists, who remained in the ministry in a reduced position, swallowed all these disavowals of their governmental action.

On the other hand, in foreign policy, the shameful attitude of Léon Blum towards the pro-fascist rebellion of Franco against a simply republican régime, itself also the outcome of a Popular Front movement, had provoked the indignation and the anger of the workers.

On these two central points, Léon Blum strove methodically to justify his policy. He invoked two “alibis”.

For his domestic policy, he said repeatedly: “The government which I headed was not a socialist government; it was, as everyone knows, a government of the Popular Front; therefore there could be no question of applying the program of our party but rather that of the Popular Front. That is just what I did to the best of my ability. There are other parties besides our own in the Popular Front, notably the Radicals. A movement like the Popular Front has its limitations. That must not be forgotten. Nor must we forget what we have done, the great reforms that we realized.” An easy defense, a convenient *distinguo* to explain away everything, even the disavowals and the retreats before the bourgeoisie, but still of a kind with which to impress the voters.

As to Spain, the adherence to the so-called non-intervention policy seemed more difficult to justify. It is not necessary to be privy to the chancelleries to know the real reason for it: it was imposed on the French government by the British cabinet, stout defender of the interests of the British bourgeoisie and resolutely hostile to a socialist revolution in Spain. But Léon Blum carefully refrained from admitting this. He affirmed that the non-intervention policy had saved the peace; intervention meant inevitable war. Take note that for the French government nothing more was involved than permitting the delivery of orders placed in France by a regular government, a government of the Popular Front, against a pro-fascist military rebellion already kept in check at Madrid and at Barcelona, the two capitals of Spain, by the Spanish proletariat. But by repeating, falsely: intervention meant inevitable war, Léon Blum profoundly perturbed the workers and the peasants, above all the latter who, having a deep aversion to war, were quite disposed to accept this justification of an indefensible policy.

Another element of the socialist success must be sought in the growing discreditment of the Stalinists among the proletariat in France. Their renunciation, now complete, of communism and the duplicity by means of which they sought to cover it up, their pursuit of the “Front of Frenchmen”, in preparation of the next imperialist war, alienated from them the best and the most conscious people in the working class. To be sure, this discreditment should not be exaggerated. The Stalinist grip upon a large part of the French proletariat still remains serious and disturbing. But it is nevertheless a significant and important fact that in the North, the industrial region

par excellence, and in various others, notably in Marseilles and throughout Provence, the cantonal elections showed them on the decline. The votes they lost went to the socialist candidates.

At the moment when the Popular Front triumphed in the elections, the workers had already lost a part of the gains that they had wrested by the strike in May-June 1936. The enormous rise in the cost of living—about 50 percent—had progressively destroyed the wage increases they had obtained. Only those workers, in very rare trades, had been preserved who had demanded, in the collective agreements, the sliding scale—wages following, even if tardily, the rise in living costs. Whereas those most sacrificed were the surest voters for the candidates of the Popular Front: the functionaries. Their salaries, very low, did not vary. Vincent Auriol, then Minister of Finance, had asked them to be patient, the cashbox of the State being too poor and the budgetary deficit too high to suffer an increase in expenditures. As a consequence, their *real* salaries had substantially declined and had become so inadequate that a lively agitation was manifested among them, the strike itself being envisaged as a supreme resort. After some horse-trading to which the leaders of their organizations lent themselves they had to be content with the derisory alms that the all-powerful Georges Bonnet was willing to grant them: 100 francs per month.

The taking back of the 40-hour week—the other great workers' gain—could not be realized in so simple nor, above all, in so automatic a fashion. The workers are resolved to defend it. But the bourgeoisie, which has already begun its attack, does not conduct it frontally; it operates very skillfully. It laments over the consequences of the reduction in the working time; over the slowing down of production which prevented French industry from profiting by the economic boom as most of the great nations did; and the increase in the price of manufactured commodities which puts it in an unfavorable position at the moment when competition is becoming sharper on the world markets. It is especially alarmed by the slowing down of war manufacturing which the "enemy"—Berlin-Rome—is pursuing at an accelerated rhythm.

Heeding these complaints, the Chautemps government charged the National Economic Council to proceed to a general investigation of production and to study, more particularly, the effects of the establishment of the 40-hour week. The conclusions of the report of this investigation have just been published. A large section is devoted to the 40-hour week. To be sure, it is not proposed to abrogate it: so drastic a measure is, for the moment, impossible. But it speaks of the necessary "regulations" for giving the law the indispensable "flexibility". Several of these "regulations" have forthwith been realized by decrees. Others will be the object of a more thorough examination. But it can already be seen that the attack will go through the war industries. The report dwells, in fact, on the absolute necessity of accelerating the manufacture of armaments and munitions and underlines the fact that both the workers' and employers' delegations found themselves fully in agreement on this point. Since, on the other hand, a big campaign is now being conducted in all the press and the newspapers repeat each morning that France has already been greatly outdistanced by Germany and by Italy in the field of aviation and in the construction of new naval units, it appears clear that the 40-hour week is being scheduled to disappear soon in the factories working for the war, which are today nationalized. And it is not the Stalinists who will defend it, for they are now in the front ranks of the most inflamed nationalists and keep repeating that they want a strong France.

This action, pursued on legal soil against the recent gains of the working class, and directed by the Popular Front government itself, is accompanied by a direct action pursued by the employers. The latter constantly provoke their workers by various violations of the stipulations in the collective agreements. It is a period of "taking soundings": when the workers fail to react, a first breach is made which will be enlarged by other attempts; if they defend themselves energetically by the strike and the occupation of the factories or stores, the employers hasten to accept a compromise in which they always win something.

To these two actions, which are public, is added a third, which is clandestine. At

the very moment when the employers declare their acceptance of the collective agreements, when they sign the contracts with their right hand, the left distributes subsidies to La Rocque or Doriot for the organization of shock troops whose first task is the destruction of the workers' organizations. They also subsidize a secret organization known as *Comité Secret d'Action Révolutionnaire*, which has already been functioning for a long time, formed by the most active elements of the *Croix de Feu* and of the *Camelots du Roi*, accumulating arms, munitions and explosives in specially arranged cellars, and which the police of the Popular Front has only just now discovered.

Thus the present situation, fairly dark, is characterized by the following features: the workers are progressively despoiled of the fruits of their victories by the Popular Front government which they brought to power; they feel it more or less plainly. Nevertheless, something of their confidence in the Popular Front still subsists and the discontentment manifests itself solely in the form of a certain push towards the socialists. The bourgeoisie, surprised by the sudden attack of May-June 1936, has already regained enough strength and self-confidence for the methodical preparation of a counter-offensive. The workers' drive is not, however, completely broken; the recent occupations of factories and stores have just proved it. But the workers have been left to themselves. On the socialist side, a return of the socialists to power is vaguely envisaged, a second Léon Blum ministry, provided *this time* with a precise and "socialist" program of action. In the General Confederation of Labor, there is a lot of chatter about the "plan" and "structural reforms". The paradox of the present moment lies in the fact that it is the bourgeoisie that is arming and thinking of resorting to revolutionary action, while the workers will be turned over to it disarmed by the Stalinists who are preoccupied primarily with realizing the "Front of Frenchmen". Such are the fruits of the Popular Front.

PARIS, December 1937.

Alfred ROSMER

# Richard Kirkwood

'The French revolution has begun', wrote Trotsky<sup>1</sup> on 9 June, 1936. The great events of that period have been largely ignored, even in France. Recently, interest has revived. The attempt by the French Communist Party to recreate the Popular Front is one reason; the great strikes of May 1968 are another.

The background to June 1936 is the depression (which hit France later than Britain), and the rise of fascism. The index of industrial production (1913 = 100) fell from 140 in 1930 to 94 in 1935. Unemployment rose steadily while wages were pushed down. The hourly wage index fell from 755 in 1930 to 710 in 1935. In the Gard *Département* in the South, miners who in 1929 were getting 30F for six tubs were getting 28F for 12 tubs in 1936. In the same area engineering workers' earnings fell from 35F to 25F per day in this period. Textile workers, or those in large stores, sometimes got less than 2F an hour.<sup>2</sup>

The fascists' attempt to overthrow the government and 'the system' by 1934 coincided with Moscow's revision of its policy of non-cooperation with the social-democrats. The consequent last-minute decision of the Communist Party and the CGTU<sup>3</sup> to join the strike called by the Socialists on 12 February ensured the success of the action. Four and a half million workers struck. In Paris the two demonstrations, coming from different directions, met and mingled into a single mass down the wide Cours de Vincennes; 150,000 people chanted 'Unity'.

As Stalin moved towards a policy of alliance with the 'democratic' imperialist powers, the CP broadened its policy from unity of action with the Socialists, to the Popular Front of all who stood for 'the defence of the interests of the working masses of town and country . . . the maintenance of democratic liberties and resistance to the attacks of the fascist bands'.<sup>4</sup> In practice this meant alliance with the Radicals (Conservative liberals), who had participated in governments whose corruption had been denounced as vigorously by the CP as by the fascists. (On 6 February 1934 the CP had demonstrated around an ambiguous mixture of anti-fascist slogans and anti-corruption slogans identical to those of the fascists themselves.)

Under cover of an alliance with the middle classes, the CP gave its support to the party that represented the hold of big business over the lower middle class and the peasantry; a party that — as the 1936 elections were to prove — was losing support as its traditional supporters moved to the Left — or the Right. The CP halted the Radicals' decline into impotence. The 'Rassemblement Populaire' included such notable defenders of the working masses as the association of 'Masonic Employers'.

In 1935 Stalin told the reactionary Prime Minister Pierre Laval that he 'fully approved the policy of national defence carried out by France to maintain its armed forces at an adequate level'.<sup>5</sup> The programme of the 'Rassemblement' was a confused mixture of anti-fascism, guarantees of trade-union rights, and social and economic reforms. These included reduction of the working week — amount unspecified; action against unemployment — details unspecified; 'aid for agriculture'; 'control of banking'. In drafting the programme, the CP had backed the Radicals' opposition to the Socialists' more ambitious reform proposals. But one significant

# The fire last time: France 1936

achievement of the early period of the Popular Front was the re-unification of the CGT and the CGTU; from now on France was to have a single mass trade union confederation.

As the elections of 1936 approached, it became clear that the Popular Front was going to win. Between them the workers' parties and the Radicals had a 'natural majority'. Only a swing to the Right could defeat them. The municipal elections showed a swing Left. The Right's only hope was to split off the Radicals, or at least a major section of them. This fact still further increased the determination of the CP to do anything to placate the Radicals. The Popular Front both responded to and encouraged a rising wave of class struggle. 1935 and the beginning of 1936 saw a steady rise in the tempo of industrial disputes. Half a million people demonstrated with the Popular Front parties on 14 July 1935.

On 16 February 1936, the Spanish Popular Front swept into power with a clear majority, unleashing a great wave of action by workers and peasants, at last aware of their own strength. The right-wing press stepped up its campaign against the 'Bolshevik danger' lurking behind the French Popular Front. But when the dust cleared on the evening of 3 May, the Popular Front had a decisive majority, 376 seats to 220. But, far more significant the masses had chosen between the parties of the alliance. The Socialists emerged as the largest party, with 146 seats as against 97 before the election; the CP doubled its vote from 783,098 to 1,468,949, and won 72 seats as against 10 (and it was still under-represented). The Radicals and the various right-wing socialist groups dropped from a total of 204 to 147. Millions of voters had deserted the Radicals for the Left; Socialist voters had moved to the Communists.

Everyone, particularly the CP, had expected the Popular Front government to have a Radical premier and majority. But it was Blum, the Socialist leader, who started to put together a government. The CP refused to participate, less from principle than from an openly-expressed desire to avoid embarrassing the government in the eyes of bourgeois opinion.

As Blum proceeded slowly through the rituals of consultation, the various classes of France showed their responses. The volume of capital leaving the country steadily increased. But it was the working class which really moved. On 11 May, workers occupied the Breguet factory in Le Havre in response to two victimisations. They won. The following day a Toulouse factory followed suit; that struggle too was won. But the real start of the movement came with the occupation on 14 May of the great Bloch aircraft factory in the Paris suburb of Courbevoie, around demands for improved wages and conditions. Bloch gave in, and one by one Paris engineering factories put in demands and prepared for strikes. The message was reinforced by the presence of a massive contingent of Bloch workers on the **600,000-strong** demonstration which commemorated the 1871 Commune on 24 May. Already several Paris engineering factories were on strike, and some occupied, when the 35,000 Renault workers came out four days later.

This was the signal for almost every major engineering plant in the Paris area to move into action. The list of factories occupied by 29 May reads like a Who's Who of French engineering: Citroen, Fiat, Chausson, Gnome et Rhone . . .

*L'Humanité* reported 100,000 out, most of them occupying the factories. And the strikes began to spread outside engineering as workers on the International Exhibition site came out.

On Monday 1 June the movement began to spread to smaller factories. By lunchtime 66 factories were occupied, by evening 150. In the days that followed, the strikes spread rapidly in the chemical industry, textiles, transport, food, printing, furniture and oil. They spread outside Paris, to Lyons and to Lille, where workers hoisted the red flag. Unions and bosses hastened to sign local agreements, and some strikes lasted only a few hours, but others began again within hours of a settlement. By 4 June the movement had paralysed newspaper distribution, restaurants and hotels, locksmiths, jewellers, the clothing trade, gas, building, agriculture; it gripped Lille, Vierzon, Rouen, Brive, Nice, Toulouse, Marseille.

Everywhere the stoppages were distinguished by the participation of the great majority of workers who had never even been unionised, by the use of the occupation tactic, by support from the general population often organised through 'Popular Front' municipalities. As the strikes spread, more and more of the population became involved. The sympathy of the lower-middle classes was clearly shown: in the Paris suburb of Pre-St Gervais a shopkeeper supplied the occupied factories with radio sets; in another area the local small shopkeepers gave 15 per cent price reductions to strikers.<sup>6</sup> This sympathy further increased as shop-assistants came out and publicised their starvation wages.

On 4 June Blum finally formed his government. The bourgeoisie had pressed him to hurry so that something could be done. Next day the new premier spoke to the nation, and promised the rapid enactment of social reforms which would satisfy the workers' main demands. But what were these demands? Many strikes had broken out with no precise demands or with purely local ones. The unions hastened to take control of the movement and to orientate it towards purely economic demands. Thus the main issues emerged as the 40-hour maximum working week with no loss of earnings, paid holidays and the signing of 'collective contracts' — the terms of these varying, of course, from industry to industry. In addition the CGT demanded measures for the 'abnormally low-paid'. At the same time the unions tried to regain control of the movement by declaring official national, or more often regional, strikes around their own demands. In many cases this was a pure formality; most of the mines, factories and sites were already occupied. And individual factories had frequently put demands that went beyond the general targets of the unions.

Between 4 and 7 June the employers acted. Formally it was the government that acted, but Blum was later to explain that the initiative came from the employers' associations. From tripartite talks came the 'Matignon agreement' of 7 June. The employers conceded the major union demands: collective contracts; union rights (a major gain in a country where the closed shop is virtually unknown); no victimisation; general wage rises, ranging from 15 per cent for the lowest-paid to seven per cent for the best-paid; and, perhaps most significant in its potential, the setting-up of a system of workers' delegates to negotiate at factory level. In return the unions

were to ensure the end of the occupations where employers accepted the agreement.

But many employers (for example in the big stores) were intransigent. More important, the workers were far from happy with the return to work. Puzzled union officials found that every time they reached agreement on one demand the workers would produce a new one. The workers were moving towards demands of a quite different order; demands which the union officials, if they believed in them at all, had relegated to a distant future — demands for workers' power. In the occupied factories the workers were beginning to feel their strength. In the assemblies of Paris engineering workers' delegates they made their feelings quite clear. Meeting after meeting had to postpone a decision, and workers began to press for further action. Two union proposals were rejected, and by 11 June still no agreement had been signed. In building the story was the same.

In some sectors the agreement had the effect of bringing out people who had not believed they could win, and who now learnt the lesson that you win what you fight for. This was the case in insurance, where the occupations began on 8 June, and in a number of provincial towns, notably Bordeaux. In many cases the workers had no precise notion of what to demand or how to organise. Lefranc<sup>7</sup> describes one such strike. Out of 500 employees there was one — inexperienced — member of the CGT and a handful of members of the class-collaborationist GFTC.<sup>8</sup> A decision to occupy was taken without even a proper meeting, but still almost everyone took part. A committee was elected, and a collection provided a taxi to union headquarters, to find out how to draw up a list of demands. Perhaps an extreme case, but a good illustration of the sudden and spontaneous sense of revolt and of power that gripped the French working class.

In the days following Matignon, the strikes continued to spread. The cafe waiters were out, the hotels closed. The movement spread to North Africa. In the occupied factories, professional entertainment was organised by the unions, and the workers staged improvised concerts. All reports agree on the joyous but self-disciplined atmosphere. In some areas committees of delegates from the striking factories, brought together by the *union locale*<sup>9</sup> of the CGT, organised liaison and joint action — the embryos of soviets were forming.

By 10 June over two million were on strike. Up till now the CP had encouraged the strikes. It welcomed the Matignon agreement (*L'Humanité* joined the social-democratic press in headlining it as a 'victory'), but supported the continuation of strikes to ensure full implementation. CP militants had often been among the most vociferous in rejecting proposed compromises. But as the government began to talk of tough measures, at the same time rushing through laws enforcing the 40-hour week and paid holidays (10, 11 and 12 June) the party shifted. To go on now was to move towards a revolutionary confrontation. On 12 June the government seized all copies of the Trotskyist paper *Lutte Ouvrière* (*Workers' Struggle*), which was calling for 'power to the workers'. On the same day the CP published a speech of Maurice Thorez to party members containing the famous phrase '*il faut savoir terminer une greve*' — 'one must know when to end a strike'.<sup>10</sup> From now on the CP was to spearhead



the return to work.

The first major return to work followed an agreement in Paris engineering. The employers made major concessions, notably for the lowest-paid, and the pressure of the CP ensured an almost unanimous acceptance by the factory delegates. One by one other industries settled, with the notable exception of the big stores where strikes dragged on into July. Even during this period, however, new sectors came out. The most important instance was the general extension of the movement in Marseille and the south-east coast; the Nice casino was occupied on 16 June! Thorez went to Marseille to renew his appeal for a return. Although spasmodic strikes (for example, by the seamen on 22 June) continued to break out, the great movement was over. The Popular Front celebrated 14 July with a *one million-strong* demonstration, but the real fight was over. But the joy and enthusiasm of June was recaptured in the rush of millions of workers to seaside and country on the first holidays they had ever known.

The Popular Front achieved little more in the way of reforms. Limited improvements in agriculture, and the development of state aid for mass sport and culture are the only two that spring to mind. The nationalisation of arms manufacturing, state control over railways, and reforms in banking all aided the ruling class. The government itself lasted only a year, in which time it was forced to devalue the franc, and to enforce a wage pause. It was replaced by a Radical government which in turn was to give way to a Centre-Right coalition. The parliament of 1936 was the same which was to vote full powers to Petain in 1940.

What of the gains of 1936? By 1938 rising prices had already more than wiped out all that had been won in increased wages. The 40-hour week was fully applied by June 1937, by the end of that year the government was already beginning to pass orders exempting particular industries. By mid-1938 the 40-hour week was only a memory. What remained was the increase in union membership. This, however, soon declined from the 5 millions it reached at the end of 1936 (from less than one million in 1935), to 1,700,000 in 1939. Factory delegates were a gain but they could achieve little in a period of defeat. Concretely the only real gain was the paid holiday.

More importantly, June 1936 profoundly affected the psychology of French workers. The myth of the Popular Front as the saviour from fascism and the bringer of important social advances is important in understanding the current situation. A mood was created. The mood of May 1968, of workers ready to move spontaneously into action, with imprecise objectives. Finally, June 1936 marked the first major step in the process by which the CP became the dominant reformist leadership of the French working class.

In the absence of a revolutionary party rooted in the working-class, the movement was unable to fulfil its revolutionary potential. But this potential shines through the spontaneity, the creativity, the joy of the movement, undimmed by subsequent defeats.

- 1 Title of article in *Wither France?* New York, 1968. See also Danos and Gibelin *Juin 36*, Paris 1972 (in French) and Guerin, D. *Front Populaire Revolution Manquée*, Paris 1970, (in French).
- 2 Lefranc *G. Juin 36*, Paris 1966 (in French) pp. 13-17. In 1935: £1 equalled about 60 Francs.
- 3 The Confédération Générale de Travail (General Confederation of Labour) was founded in 1906 on a 'revolutionary syndicalist' basis. During the 1914-18 war it became openly reformist. Split in 1921 largely owing to the manoeuvres of the reformist leaders: the revolutionary minority (about a third) formed the CGTU (Unitary CGT). By 1929 this was thoroughly Stalinised, while the CGT was totally reformist. In 1935 the CGT had 700,000 members, the CGTU 250,000.
- 4 Thorez (General Secretary of the CP), speech of 10 October 1934, quoted in Lefranc, *Histoire du Front Populaire*, Paris 1965 p. 67.
- 5 Danos & Gibelin, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
- 6 Danos and Gibelin, *op. cit.*, vol II p. 50.
- 7 *Histoire*, *op. cit.*, Appendix 16 pp. 455-459.
- 8 French Confederation of Christian Workers
- 9 Trades Council
- 10 Danos and Gibelin p. 115.