

Readings on the General Strike

Contents:

- "Puerto Rico General Strike: Forge a Revolutionary Workers Party!"
The Internationalist supplement (July 1998)
- Anna, "Response to Gino's Document of 25 October 1994," in ICL
International Internal Bulletin No. 39 (December 1996)
- Jan Norden, "Popular Front and General Strike in Italy" (29
November 1994), in ICL *International Internal Bulletin* No. 39

Internationalist Group Class Readings

July 1998

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Readings on the General Strike

1926

The General Strike in 1926 was a significant event in British history, marking the first time that a large number of different trades and professions joined together to support a common cause. The strike was organized by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and lasted for nine days, from May 4 to May 13, 1926. It was a response to the government's attempt to force a wage reduction on coal miners, who were facing a severe downturn in the coal industry.

The strike had a profound impact on the country, as it brought many essential services to a halt. The government declared the strike illegal and used the army to maintain order in the streets. The strike also led to the formation of the Unemployed Workers' Movement and the National Unemployed Workers' League.

The General Strike of 1926 was a landmark event in the history of the British labor movement. It demonstrated the power of collective action and the willingness of workers to sacrifice for their common interests. The strike also highlighted the need for a more organized and unified labor movement, which led to the formation of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and the National Union of Teachers (NUT).

The Internationalist

**For All-Out Workers Mobilization to Stop PRTC Privatization--
Defeat the Colonialist, Capitalist Assault on Labor**

Puerto Rico General Strike Forge a Revolutionary Workers Party!

Elect Strike Committees! Defend Picket Lines That Nobody Dares Cross!

From our special correspondent in Puerto Rico.

Yankee Imperialism Out--For Puerto Rico's Right to Independence!

For a Socialist Federation of the Caribbean!

SAN JUAN, July 2--As the rulers of Puerto Rico celebrate 100 years of U.S. colonial domination, this Caribbean island nation is being swept by a powerful wave of workers struggle. After ramming privatization of the government-owned Puerto Rico Telephone Company (PRTC) through a pliant legislature, Governor Pedro Rosselló is reaping a whirlwind of mass opposition. The two telephone workers unions immediately declared a strike, now in its 15th day. Last week the electrical and water workers struck in solidarity. Now, as public support for the strikers mounts in the face of brutal police attacks on picketers, a coalition of 53 unions joined by student, leftist, women's and community groups has called a 48-hour general strike beginning July 7.

"We're calling on the people to prepare as if a hurricane were coming," said Annie Cruz, the president of the Independent Brotherhood of Telephone Workers (HIETEL), in announcing the island-wide walkout. The day before, an assembly of several thousand cheering union delegates at a sports center in the city of Carolina, called by the Broad Committee of Trade Union Organizations (CAOS) and representing some 300,000 workers, voted unanimously for a general strike to "paralyze" Puerto Rico's economy. Already last October 1, some 100,000 marched on the capitol in San Juan under the slogan "Puerto Rico Is Not For Sale" during a one-day "national work stoppage" against the privatization of la Telefónica.

There is no doubt that organized labor and its allies have the power to bring this Caribbean island to a grinding halt such as hasn't happened since the strike of 1934, at the

time of a bitter sugar cane workers strike. Puerto Rico today is heavily industrialized, with hundreds of thousands of union members. The telephone workers strike is already the biggest single walkout in years, with more than 150 picket lines around the island, and no one can remember when a strike has received so much enthusiastic support. A determined general strike would certainly have the strength of a gale force tropical storm, but it is more than that. This is a key battle in the class war, which Puerto Rican and U.S. workers must fight to win.

The struggle of workers in Puerto Rico is intrinsically linked to that of workers in the U.S., particularly in New York City. This was reflected in the picket today sponsored by hospital workers Local 1199 against Banco Popular in New York City, which is only a token of what is needed. Hundreds of thousands of workers of Puerto Rican origin in the financial capital of U.S. imperialism are a key section of the municipal, hospital and other unions, and have shown a tremendous will to struggle. At the same time, together with blacks and immigrants, they face an escalation of racist repression. This was graphically shown in the case of Anthony Báez, the 22-year-old Puerto Rican whose murder by NYC cop Francis Livoti has become a symbol of racist police terror.

The sale of the PRTC to an American corporation, and one that has prominently lobbied for statehood, has sparked widespread opposition from those opposed to outright annexation of the island by the U.S. The working class, both in Puerto Rico and the U.S., has a vital interest in fighting colonialism. But colonial domination of Puerto Rico cannot be defeated with the bourgeois program of nationalism. Even the most "left" variants of nationalism seek to chain the workers to a supposed "national" bourgeoisie. The Puerto Rican "entrepreneurs," as the nationalist left delicately refers to them, are branch officer managers and junior partners of Yankee imperialism who exploit the working people just as their U.S. counterparts do. The

fight against privatization extends throughout Latin America and the capitalist world. And this is not just the effect of "neo-liberal" policies, as reformists claim. Key to defeating this capitalist-imperialist system is the struggle to forge revolutionary workers parties internationally.

Mobilize the Working Class in the Struggle for Power

In handing control of the telephone company over to the U.S.-owned GTE Corp., Governor Rosselló has already declared war on the workers. This petty tyrant and his pro-statehood New Progressive Party (PNP) are seen on the picket lines as THE enemy. In order to fulfill his dreams of "crossing over" from a colonial satrap to a rising star in U.S. politics (he is chairman of the national governors conference), Rosselló is willing and even eager to spill workers' blood. But this ruthless privatizer is far from the only enemy of Puerto Rican workers. Behind him stands the power of Yankee imperialism, for which Puerto Rico is a giant base for military and economic operations to control Latin America. There is a direct connection here: a key reason why the PRTC is being sold to GTE is that latter provides the phone service for the giant U.S. Navy base at Roosevelt Roads and for the U.S. army's Southern Command, which is in the process of moving from Panama to Puerto Rico.

The Puerto Rican governor is trying to impress the Clinton White House, the Pentagon and Congress that he can impose heavy-handed "law and order" in the largest remaining U.S. colony, while getting rid of government-owned industry and other Puerto Rican "peculiarities" that stand in the way of statehood (annexation). Already Rosselló has privatized the shipping lines (Navieras de Puerto Rico), as well as housing projects, hospitals and jails, leading to numerous layoffs. With the PRTC on the auction block it is estimated that privatization will put 2,000 out of 6,400 union jobs on the chopping block (as well as raising telephone rates). Electrical energy, water and sewer works and a host of government services are on Rosselló's privatization hit list. Meanwhile, he hires more and more police to put down protests.

And the cops have been doing their bloody job. On the first day of the strike, June 18, a phalanx of police was dispatched to the Plaza Celulares PRTC center to bring in several busloads of scab contract workers and managers. There were riot police from the Tactical Operations Unit, better known as the Shock Force, as well as the Saturation Unit and the Mounted Police. Oziel, a phone worker at the Celulares center, told The Internationalist that the workers grabbed hold of the fence and refused to move. Thereupon cops began to beat them repeatedly with macanas (riot sticks) that have steel balls protruding from one end, spray them in the face with pepper gas, and drag them into the street. Most of the police had removed or covered their identification badges.

Many of those who received vicious beatings were women. Soriel Cruz, a leader of the UIET phone workers union and spokesman for the group "Women Against

Privatization," called workers to defend the picket lines when the buses arrived. The cops hit her in the breasts with their riot sticks, then threw her on the ground and kicked her. Photos and video shots of women being savagely beaten caused mass outrage. But the governor demanded more macanazos (beatings), and the cops were soon back at it. On June 22, at the Metro Office Park PRTC offices in Guaynabo, an estimated 100 police from the Shock Force arrested a woman student and a union lawyer, beat a TV cameraman, and beat one worker, Raúl Santana, so badly in the head that he had to be hospitalized for two days. A photo of Santana lying in a pool of blood while a baton-wielding cop stood over him was shown around the world. El Nuevo Día (23 June) headlined: "The Strike of Blood."

Yet the strikers were not always on the receiving end. The same day, after cops beat a picketer at Plaza Celulares, angry strikers turned on the attackers and a number of cops (including several high-ranking officials) received a well-deserved drubbing. During the three-day UTIER (electrical workers) solidarity strike last week, police accused picketers of a "provocation" because their picket signs were mounted on solid 2 x 2 sticks. But readiness to defend the picket lines must be organized. The bosses appeal to the courts to get injunctions to allow management and contract scabs to enter the struck workplace. Strikers must rip the injunctions and impose their own proletarian order, declaring that picket lines mean don't cross and enforcing this basic principle with union defense groups. When no one dares cross a picket line, the chances of winning strikes will be immeasurably increased.

So far active participation in the struggle against privatization has been mainly limited to public sector unions, the ones most directly affected. But an effective general strike must include private sector workers as well as non-unionized workers, notably from the huge petrochemical complexes that dot the island. To organize the unorganized it is necessary to put forward a class-struggle program of transitional demands to mobilize all workers in a struggle against capital and the colonial overlords. To answer the persistently double-digit unemployment, workers must fight for a sliding scale of hours, to divide the available jobs to provide work for all. As real wages have fallen steadily for the last two decades, labor must fight for the demand for a sliding scale of wages to protect against the ravages of inflation. To fight the numerous injuries and deaths due to unsafe working conditions, unions must form workers safety committees with the power to stop production when they judge necessary.

The biggest weakness of the workers' struggle against privatization is at the top, where union bureaucrats have been at odds over whether the strike should be limited or indefinite, when to call it or whether to strike at all. The leader of the largest phone workers union, the UIET, only reluctantly joined the walkout. Now, a leader of the local affiliate of the AFL-CIO, the FT, representing under 10 percent of Puerto Rico's unionized workers, declares it is pointless to strike against privatization of the phone

company. The head of another federation, the CPT, declares that each of its unions will decide how long it will join in the general strike! The determination of the telephone strikers (and the overwhelming popularity of the strike) has kept it solid, but it is necessary to organize that strength. Union militants must fight for elected strike committees, which can be recalled at any time, to place control of the strike in the hands of the ranks and provide a means to block a bureaucratic sellout.

Such committees must establish close ties with other sections of the oppressed--strike support committees, neighborhood and block committees in poor districts, etc.--in coordinating the distribution of food and essential supplies, drawing in working-class housewives, the unemployed and youth. If the struggle intensifies, strike committees may be able to impose workers control of production and could serve as the nucleus of workers councils, as an organizational form for a struggle for socialist revolution and for a workers state. Revolutionaries must link the present struggle to the fight against colonialism and all forms of oppression, from the struggle against U.S. military bases and for the freedom of independence fighters to the fight against racism and the oppression of women.

All this poses the need for the working class to lead a fight against the root of the problem: the capitalist system itself. Trotsky wrote of France in the mid-1930s that in order to judge the readiness for a general strike and to "strengthen the militant mood of the masses, it is necessary to place before them a program of revolutionary action.... Above all the tasks and partial demands of our epoch there stands the question of power" ("Once Again, Whither France?" March 1935). This is no less true of the Puerto Rican general strike today.

For a Trotskyist Party in Puerto Rico!

Above all, it is necessary to build a revolutionary leadership of the proletariat. As Leon Trotsky, the co-leader together with V.I. Lenin of the October 1917 Russian Revolution, wrote in the 1938 Transitional Program, the founding document of the Fourth International, "The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of revolutionary leadership." This fundamental thesis continues to be true today, and particularly so in the case of a general strike, which poses point-blank the question: which class shall rule, the bourgeoisie or the proletariat?

The struggle over the Telefónica is a make-or-break battle for Puerto Rican labor. Yet even leftist union leaders approach the general strike as a pressure tactic rather than a struggle for power. In calling a general strike, the union leaderships have been forced into a corner by Rosselló's anti-labor offensive rather than systematically gearing up for a showdown with the capitalist government. Despite occasional militant rhetoric, at bottom their common program, in different variations, is that of reformism, seeking to reform the present system (such as with state-owned public services) while accepting the framework of capitalism. Revolutionary communists, in contrast, seek in every struggle to prepare the working class for a fight for

state power, treating reforms as a by-product of the revolutionary struggle.

"This is a political strike because the workers didn't go out for a quarter more in the contract, they're protesting against the policy of privatization. That's why the government is afraid of it," commented Ricardo Santos, secretary of health and safety of the UTIER electrical workers union (El Vocero, 25 June). That is true, and that is a key reason why this strike must be waged politically. But on the basis of what politics? Anti-statehood bourgeois parties, such as the small Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) and sections of the Popular Democrats (PPD, supporters of Puerto Rico's present "commonwealth" status, a thinly disguised form of colonialism), have engaged in electoral grandstanding by pretending to be friends of the telephone workers. Yet it was under PPD governor Hernández Colón that the first attempt was made to privatize the PRTC, in 1990, and long distance service was handed over to a Spanish company.

"This goes beyond any people's strike, beyond a war against privatization...the war is against the government," vituperated Puerto Rico's police chief Pedro Toledo, who has flaunted his membership in the government party. This former FBI agent has repeatedly tried to blame the strike on outside "agitators" and "subversives," listing names of leftist and university activists, and trying to whip up a scare over "terrorism." "I think that what many of these subversive groups want is a revolution," Toledo fulminates (San Juan Star, 30 June). In this same language of McCarthyite anti-communist witchhunting, on the day the general strike was called, the Puerto Rican House of Representatives passed a resolution, beginning: "The strike in the telephone company is only the excuse of a small group of agitators and political extremists who seek to impose themselves through violence, threats, sabotage." These are the fears of a nervous ruling class that sees behind this outbreak of sharp class struggle the spectre of red revolution.

The raw material for socialist revolution is there. As picketers chant, "se siente, se siente, el obrero combatiente" (you can tell the workers are fighting) the bosses are acutely aware of this, and the danger it poses to their rule. Only a few years after the imperialists trumpeted victory in the Cold War and proclaimed the "death of Communism," even some of the more intelligent pro-capitalist press has commented that, 150 years on, the Communist Manifesto is still relevant, and highly accurate in its description of present-day capitalism. What is lacking is the revolutionary proletarian vanguard to lead the combative workers in a struggle for power. The exploiters in Puerto Rico have several parties standing for different formulas of capitalist rule. The exploited masses need a revolutionary workers party to lead the class struggle against the colonial capitalist government and its Yankee imperialist masters.

A revolutionary workers party in Puerto Rico must be based on the Trotskyist program of permanent revolution. The democratic tasks such as national liberation can only be accomplished through workers revolution, led by a

communist party, which must immediately take on socialist tasks, extending the revolution to the most advanced capitalist-imperialist countries. We seek to forge a Leninist vanguard party that would act as a tribune of the people, in championing the cause of all oppressed sectors (including minorities, women, homosexuals, immigrants) against their oppressors. Yet the group which presents itself as the "Puerto Rican section of the Fourth International," the Taller de Formación Política (TFP), does not seek to build an independent Trotskyist party but rather seeks a "broad" socialist party. The international organization to which the TFP adheres, the United Secretariat (Usec), does not represent Trotskyism but rather the program of Pabloism, of tailing after a variety of non-revolutionary forces. In Puerto Rico, the TFP is part of the Frente Socialista.

The Frente Socialista also includes the Movimiento Socialista de Trabajadores (MST) and the Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores Puertorriqueños-Macheteros (PRTP), who in turn are part of the Congreso Nacional Hostosiano, a coalition with petty-bourgeois and bourgeois independentista forces. When the FS talks of "internationalism" it refers to "particular ties" with "the Puerto Rican community living in the United States, because we are part of the same people," and of the FS' participation in the Foro de São Paulo, a popular front coalition of leftist and bourgeois nationalist parties in Latin America. This is not proletarian internationalism or the "political independence of the working class" which the Frente declares as its "fundamental political objective," but rather class-collaborationist nationalism.

During the current labor struggle against privatization, many leftist militants have been active in building pickets and as part of the CAOS umbrella group of labor and leftist organizations, but there has been a striking absence of political propaganda by self-proclaimed socialist groups. Their activity in the strike has been limited to militant trade-unionism and nationalism.

For Proletarian Internationalism, Not Nationalist Popular Frontism

In the present strike, there are ubiquitous references to "the people." In declaring the phone workers' struggle against privatization a "strike of the people," many militants want to underline the widespread popular support for the strikers against the despised Rosselló. But contained in the idea of an undivided "people" is a whole program--the program of "classless" (in fact, bourgeois) populism. The chant, often repeated on the picket lines, that "The people united will never be defeated," was the slogan of the Chilean Unidad Popular government under Salvador Allende. This was a classic "popular front," which politically ties the working class to a sector of the capitalist class in the name of "anti-imperialism," "anti-fascism" or other bourgeois-"democratic" labels. Such class-collaborationist coalitions are a favorite device of the reformists to block revolutionary struggle and keep the working masses confined within the limits of capitalism. By doing so, the popular front in fact aids fascist and pro-imperialist forces.

The "people united" was defeated in Chile, in the bloody coup of September 1973, precisely because of the absence of a proletarian vanguard to split the false "unity" of class collaboration and to organize the working class in the struggle for its revolutionary class interests. The butcher Pinochet himself was brought into the "Popular Unity" government in a bid to win "moderate" Christian Democratic support. The result was a bloody massacre, just as when Stalin ordered the Chinese Communists to "ally" with the Nationalist general Chiang Kai-shek in 1927, or when the Maoist Stalinists of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) bound the masses to the nationalist general Sukarno, producing the 1965 bloodbath in which more than a million PKI members, labor activists and ethnic minorities were killed. More recently, in Haiti the popular front around the Lavalas movement of Aristide paved the way for U.S. military intervention, giving neo-colonialism a new face while maintaining the wretched poverty and exploitation of the workers and peasants.

In the struggle for their emancipation, the working people must rely on their own class strength and the support of other oppressed sectors against capitalism. Any political alliance with sectors of the bourgeoisie can only paralyze the strength of the exploited and oppressed. Even Rubén Berrios' minuscule PIP with its independentista rhetoric only wants to "independently" exploit Puerto Rican workers under U.S. tutelage (and with fees from U.S. bases, "for a time" of course). In Puerto Rico today, the program of class collaboration is expressed in a pervasive nationalist rhetoric characteristic of almost the entire left. Thus while the MST called in its Third Congress (June 1996) for "giving priority to the struggles and demands representing the interests of the working class and oppressed sectors of society," it placed these in the framework of "independentista unity." The political consequences of this nationalist program and rhetoric are extremely harmful for the workers struggle.

Much has been made of the fact that the PRTC is a profitable and modern (fully digitalized) phone company, which Rosselló is selling off for a pittance (GTE will pay at most \$300 million for a company valued at over \$2.2 billion), likely leading to sharply increased rates. Many have pointed out that after buying out ITT (which ran the phone system until 1974), the PRTC increased the number of telephones in Puerto Rico from 200,000 to 1.6 million. But referring to "Our Telefónica," as a leftist university professor did in a recent column (Claridad, 2 July), or saying that the Telefónica "belongs to the people of Puerto Rico," as the former leader of the UIET phone workers union did in a picket line speech, is false and diverts the struggle. The PRTC belongs to the Puerto Rican capitalist government, and its profits are taken from the sweat of its workers. The only way utilities and social services will really become "ours" is through the revolutionary expropriation of all the exploiters, when a government of the working class in Puerto Rico and internationally can organize the economy to serve the interests of the workers

and oppressed.

The same unionist praised the strike as the struggle of "a whole united people," and noted that the PRTC up until now has subsidized various state services, including education "and the raises for the police itself." He went on to appeal to "our police brothers," to say that they should not become accomplices of this privatization if they want support in their struggles! This is dangerously wrong in every way. False consciousness about the role of the police is pervasive in the strike. A banner and picket chants declare "Club-wielding policeman, you too are a worker." No, a cop is a cop. The police are not workers but professional strikebreakers and racist killers, the enforcers of the anti-working-class laws of the bourgeoisie. The slightest confusion about the nature of the police produces illusions that will be paid in more workers' blood.

Our comrades of the Liga Cuarta-Internacionalista do Brasil (LQB), section of the League for the Fourth International, have waged a bitter struggle, facing armed military police and endless court suits against them, to carry out the expulsion of the police from the Municipal Workers Union of the steel city of Volta Redonda. As Marxists they declare that the police are not "brothers" or "fellow workers," but the armed fist of the bourgeoisie, as shown from the "war on drugs" in Puerto Rico's housing projects to the murder of Anthony Báez and the police torture of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima in New York City. This understanding is vital to the victory of the Puerto Rican strikers today.

Puerto Rican nationalism narrows the struggle to the confines of this Caribbean island. Yet the drive for privatization is international in scope and has escalated in recent years as a direct result of the counterrevolutionary destruction of the Soviet Union and the bureaucratically deformed workers states of East Europe. Today, workers from Mexico and Brazil to France and Italy are fighting against privatization of state-owned companies and the accompanying slashing of workers gains. Meanwhile, the threat of counterrevolution and the destruction of the planned economy and collectivized property looms in Cuba and China, which would spell disaster for Cuban and Chinese workers and further embolden the capitalists internationally. It is impossible to struggle against privatization in Puerto Rico without fighting against the imperialist system which is behind it. That means in the first instance, forging a close alliance with U.S. workers who face the same bosses.

Puerto Rican nationalism also turns its back on a key section of the working class, the 300,000 immigrants from the Dominican Republic, both legal and "illegal," who live and work here. They are subject to arbitrary raids, detention and deportation by the INS immigration cops who also raid sweatshops in New York and Los Angeles. Even on the left there are instances of hostility to Dominicans. A class-conscious workers movement in Puerto Rico must champion their cause, fighting against deportations here just as it must in the U.S. There is ample support for this. At the assembly of thousands of union delegates in Caro-

lina on June 28, a representative from the Dominican unions received tremendous and prolonged applause. A revolutionary internationalist vanguard is needed to mobilize this sentiment, raising among demands of the strike an end to all deportations, and calling for workers action to stop them.

Likewise, a revolutionary workers party would struggle for the liberation of women and highlight the role of women workers, who have played a key role in the telephone workers strike. Most of the PRTC's unionized employees are women, women have been targeted by the police thugs, and many of the union delegates and leaders are women. The working class as a whole must take up the fight against women's oppression, including raising demands for free abortion on demand and for free 24-hour day care centers, and for extending this to all.

For a Socialist Federation of the Caribbean!

The telephone workers strike and the general strike against privatization are intimately related to the eternal question of Puerto Rico's "status." A key reason for Rosselló's push to sell off the Telefónica is to make Puerto Rico more eligible for statehood by further integrating its economy into that of the mainland U.S. What this means in practice is U.S. corporations buying up everything they don't already own on the island.

The position of the Clinton administration and the U.S. Democratic Party has recently shifted from support for the present "commonwealth" status to backing statehood for Puerto Rico. This is partly from a calculation that Puerto Rico would vote Democratic, and also in order to ensure the continued presence of the numerous U.S. military installations on the island (instead of being forced out as the U.S. Army's SouthCom was from Panama). This shift, reflected in the Young/Craig amendment now before the U.S. Congress calling for a new referendum slanted toward statehood, has also led to a switch of political alliances in Puerto Rico. The pro-statehood PNP, traditionally aligned with the U.S. Republicans, is now lined up with Clinton's Democrats, while the PPD (and the PIP) are looking to the most reactionary, racist forces in Congress to oppose statehood, particularly those pushing for "English only"! The Puerto Rican masses can only lose from this cynical maneuvering.

Statehood, no less than the present colonial status, would be inherently inimical to the interests of Puerto Rican working people, whose incomes are presently far below those of the poorest U.S. state. It would be accompanied by a further slashing of social programs, an offensive against the Spanish language and other forms of racist discrimination. The Internationalist Group and the League for the Fourth International advocate independence for Puerto Rico, in order to strike a blow against U.S. imperialism and because only by breaking out of the national subjugation of colonial rule can the international class struggle come to the fore. We support struggles for independence from colonial rule, even when they are led by petty-bourgeois and bourgeois forces, at the same time as

we fight for proletarian leadership of the struggle against imperialism through international socialist revolution. Genuine national liberation can only be achieved by workers revolution, in Puerto Rico and the U.S. We demand: Yankee imperialism get out! U.S. military out of Puerto Rico and all of the Caribbean! Return Guantánamo to Cuba!

At the same time, however distorted by the mechanisms of colonial referendums, the fact remains that an overwhelming majority of the Puerto Rican population does not presently favor independence. As the right to self-determination is a democratic question, and the working class has no interest in forcing independence against the will of the Puerto Rican population--especially when the impetus for separation comes from right-wing reactionaries--we underline our defense of Puerto Rico's right to independence. We also stress the need for a socialist federation of the Caribbean. A large part of the opposition to immediate independence is the (accurate) perception that an independent capitalist Puerto Rico would quickly see its living standards fall to the level of desperate poverty of the Dominican Republic next door. An isolated workers state, on the other hand, would face the imperialist boycott and encirclement that has pushed Cuba to the wall economically.

From Marx to Lenin and Trotsky, genuine communists have always held that socialism cannot be built in one country. This lesson, underlined by the collapse of the USSR, is all the more true of a small Caribbean island in what U.S. rulers regard as an "American lake." But fighting for a voluntary socialist federation of workers states in the region as part of a socialist united states of Latin America, in conjunction with socialist revolution in the United States itself, could unite the ethnically and linguistically diverse peoples of the region in a common struggle against imperialism. From the time of the 1791 Haitian Revolution against colonial slavery to the Cuban Revolution, struggles for social progress have quickly spread through the Antilles.

Both in Puerto Rico and the U.S., revolutionaries have a special responsibility to defend the Cuban bureaucratically deformed workers state against imperialist military aggression and internal counterrevolution. Puerto Rico has been used by the Yankee imperialists as a staging ground for its attacks on and encirclement of Cuba, and as a training ground for counterrevolutionaries throughout Latin America. At the same time and as a key part of our defense of the Cuban Revolution, we fight for proletarian political revolution to oust the Stalinist bureaucratic leadership under Castro, which is paving the way for capitalist restoration, and to replace it with soviet democracy in the form of revolutionary workers councils. In Puerto Rico, Cuba, the United States and throughout the world, we fight to build Trotskyist parties in the struggle to reforge the Fourth International as the world party of socialist revolution.

If the general strike called for July 7 and 8 is to be

anything more than a two-day work stoppage and parade, it must be animated by a program of revolutionary class struggle. As Leon Trotsky wrote in his 1935 pamphlet, "Once Again, Whither France?":

"The fundamental importance of the general strike independent of the partial successes, which it may and then again may not provide, lies in the fact that it poses the question of power in a revolutionary manner. By shutting down the factories, transport, and generally all the means of communication, power stations, etc., the proletariat by this very act paralyzes not only production but also the government. The state power remains suspended in mid-air....

"Whatever may be the slogans and the motive for which the general strike is initiated, if it includes the genuine masses and if these masses are quite resolved to struggle, the general strike inevitably poses before all the classes in the nation the question: who will be the master."

Since the general strike poses this question, it is essential that a vanguard party of the working class be forged to provide the answer, to lead a revolutionary struggle for power. Today there is no such party, yet a general strike is urgently needed in Puerto Rico in order to defeat the government's anti-worker privatization offensive. This requires of revolutionaries that they redouble their efforts to forge the revolutionary workers party that is indispensable for the victory of the working class through international socialist revolution. ■

The Internationalist

A Journal of Revolutionary Marxism for the
Reforging of the Fourth International

Publication of the Internationalist Group

Annual subscription US\$10 for five issues

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18.

RESPONSE TO GINO'S DOCUMENT OF 25 OCTOBER 1994
(translation)

by Anna

2 November 1994

The method of "routinism and sectarianism"

As I have already said at various meetings, I believe that the discussion of whether or not to have a leaflet that calls for an unlimited general strike to distribute at demonstrations reflects a capitulation to the combative form of the popular front in Italy today as well as a grave error in confronting our adversaries that are larger than we are. The flea and the elephant (guess who the flea is).

I believe that first of all you can't separate this discussion from the process of demoralization and weakness toward the popular front that has characterized the last year of the life of the LTd'I. The resignations of Bruno, of Roberto, and of Ramona remain profound signs of an uneasiness that still hasn't been sufficiently characterized in its real dimensions. We can call it a crisis of expectations with the consequent loss of sight of the opportunities!

We have had a battle, we elected a new leadership and voted motions of perspectives that readjusted our activity in proportion to our size and our real capacity. We corrected the large gap between the national leadership and the Milan local that only reflected the hurry to grow at the expense of program.

To define as "routinism" and "sectarianism" the reduction of the production of Spartaco from four to three annually, having regular internal courses for the formation of cadre and regularly intervening as much as possible in a very hot situation for the Italian working class with the forces that we have, means to look for a shortcut.

If this isn't the shortcut of Bruno, what else is being proposed by Gino? If Gino believes that this discussion doesn't have anything to do with what is going on, he is mistaken. But Gino isn't naive because he wants to change the political leadership and transform Spartaco into a leaflet. This surely wouldn't be routinist, but as Alison correctly remarked, it would be a liquidation.

The waterboys of the Popular Front

This is how the discussion began: With the proposal for a leaflet that brought Spartaco No. 44 up to date and with the opposition of Gino to the leaflet for our public assembly of 15 October, which was defined as Bordigist, backward and abstract, with an ultimacist character.

"Bordigist because it always says the same things";

- "Backward because it calls for workers resistance when the working class is already struggling";
- "Abstract and with an ultimatum character because the slogans taken from Spartaco No. 44 You can't stop the strong state with class collaboration! Break with the popular front! and Forge an authentic Bolshevik party! For a workers government based on factory councils! are an appeal for the masses to break with their leadership and come over to us."

And with the opposition to adapting the article written in WV into a piece of propaganda for Italy. Instead, Gino thought we should have called for an "unlimited general strike," and therefore he asserts in his document:

"A critical worker could have easily retorted: 'You say that you can't defeat the strong state with class collaboration. Correct, but we are doing a general strike, not class collaboration!'. . .

"How can a worker on strike, called to the struggle by his leadership, who moreover believes he is participating in a general strike against the government, be attracted by a program of this kind? Why should he break with his leadership while they call him into the struggle?"

Unless I have missed something, it seems to me that even though the working class is very combative, it doesn't have our understanding of the bourgeois state. Maybe it is Gino who doesn't know how to respond to the questions of the hypothetical worker!

Everybody wants a general strike more or less more "real" than the others. In the mass consciousness at every demonstration the mobilization is to bring down Berlusconi and replace him at least with the progressives or, by the most hopeful, with a parliamentary RC/PDS government. The problem is precisely that the combativity of the working class is channeled into a movement to pressure for the popular front, and our task is not to emphasize the quality of the combativity but to warn of the betraying character of the reformist leadership and their popular-front politics that consist of preserving the bourgeois state. A confrontation of class against class, like the unlimited general strike, implies the question of power. Without the revolutionary party this will inevitably end in a defeat for the working class; both if the bourgeoisie turns to the popular front (and it is for this that the reformists want to use it) or if they turn decisively to the fascists to lead. If we don't see this element of the subordination of the combativity to the popular front, we will inevitably become its waterboys. Gino's proposal to substitute Spartaco with a leaflet is a proposal to liquidate.

Gino knows well, as he recognizes in his quotes, that the workers don't see the necessity of breaking with their leadership or even with the bourgeois context now. The anti-fascist popular front works!

The ranks' throwing coins at the union bureaucrats has ended, and the peace between the official trade-union bureaucrats, COBAS, and autonomes has returned. In Rome they were all on the same

platform for the speech that also thanked the police of the SIULP who demonstrated screaming "Maroni, Maroni, bring down Berlusconi" on the 12th in Rome (they are also against Berlusconi). They were thanked from the platform in Milan on the 14th. Meanwhile RC demonstrated yet another time with the "committee for justice" (the Northern League and the AN fascists are in this) in front of the Milano courthouse in order to appeal to the judges to carry out justice against the monopolist Berlusconi.

°On the eve of the general strike of the 14th, Il Manifesto had an interview with Ferrando and Grisolia who declared: "For a real general strike, for a real alternative."

°While Bertinotti in the same paper proclaimed his objectives: "General strike; 35 years 35 hours"--that is, pension after 35 years and a 35-hour week for everybody in order to have "time for liberated life" (under capitalism).

°The paper of the Grantites, Falce e martello: "All out struggle until the government falls!"

°The day of the strike Liberazione had in huge letters: "general strike" (in red).

Gino says that after the strike of the 14th, by not calling for a general strike, "we didn't have anything to offer to the working class...putting forth only negative slogans on class collaboration" and therefore "leaders that don't have anything to say in a general strike situation aren't revolutionary leaders."

In short, it seems clear to me that at this moment in the consciousness of everybody the general strike is a tool to pressure for a progressive popular front that throws out Berlusconi. The next objective for PDS and RC in the popular front are the elections for the mayors of 251 towns on 20 November. In this regard, part of the bourgeoisie is already betting on the ratings of the electoral survey in October. See Il Mondo (24/31 October 1994 in the article "Why Berlusconi is beginning to lose consensus"): "Here are the people most liked by Italians": D'Alema 24.4%; Berlusconi 19.4%; Fini 19%; Bossi 6.5%.

I don't know in what world Walter is living when in his document he wants to argue that "The PDS sees as a nightmare the possibility of a 'Progressisti' government that comes to power as the result of a victorious hard class struggle" and that the reformist leaders "are not pushing or encouraging the struggles." In this regard, of what significance are the 40 special trains and 10,000 buses, 4 ships from Sardegna, the trade-union collection of 40 billion (28 million American dollars) to finance the national demonstration of the CGIL/CISL/UIL of 12 November?

At this moment, what constitutes the obstacle that the working class doesn't see is exactly what happens after Berlusconi.

What we must say in our propaganda is that a progressive government will be just as anti-worker and racist, that the magistrates don't defend the workers but will use "mani pulite" to increase their power and use it against the workers' organizations.

In order for an authentic general strike to win, it is absolutely necessary to break with class-collaborationist politics. This strike can win only if it relies on workers militias for its defense, and organs of workers control or workers councils are conscious that working-class power is the order of the day and that this has nothing to do with parliamentary elections. At the moment that the bourgeoisie tries to smash and repress with force these workers organs that are posing the question of who has the power in society, they must be able to split the army, rout the police and smash the fascist scum back into the sewers that they came from. But to do all this there must be a Bolshevik party! We must construct this party; it doesn't exist today, it can't be done with RC and PDS. To call for an unlimited general strike means to pose the question of power; to do it when the party doesn't exist is criminal.

This doesn't have anything to do with our propaganda in 1984 with the PSI in the government, when we called for "Enough--it is time to change! It is time for the general strike!" (not an unlimited general strike) when the working class that wanted to struggle went directly up against the trade-union bureaucracy that tried to impede them. After the experience of millions of people in Rome on 24 March, Lama openly declared himself against following this path. The PCI openly declared that it was against a hard opposition to the "decreto-bis" (second decree). The workers were tearing up their trade-union cards, leaving the CISL for the CGIL, and waging a ferocious struggle against the trade-union tops who were doing everything to douse the flames. The workers pulled the factory councils, the CDF, in their wake and they were looking for a way to win. We were there to offer them one. Propagandistically in 1984 the appeal for a general strike posed the question that for the working class to really defend itself it needed a new political leadership, a revolutionary leadership!

Today the workers think that the realization of the strike is possible with the support of their leadership, therefore the contradiction between the base and tops doesn't exercise its influence, the general strike assumes a secondary aspect in the face of the necessity to break with the "anti-fascist" popular front.

Regarding the accusation that we don't produce propaganda in Italy, I would like to note that the article that appeared in WV that Gino contests so much is based on a report written by Carlo. (Oh! Excuse me, this doesn't count because Gino didn't write it?)

Propaganda or agitation?

Comrades, we are a small, very unstable propaganda group! We direct ourselves to a limited public and not to the masses! We must have programmatic polemics with our political adversaries, like Grisolia and Ferrando. Not compete with them for the immediate leadership of the masses of RC, but split them if possible or recruit from the ITO, like the case of Alberto M. of Cremona. We must look for regroupments where they are possible, taking

advantage of the contradictions that counterpose the class struggle to the popular front.

I think that the fact that in general the old generation of the ex-PCI that is now in RC is so sensitive to and pays such close attention to our propaganda, and the authority that Spartaco has earned in this milieu in these 14 years of our existence, make us lose sight of our real objectives. We can't recruit masses of 50-year-olds from a mass organization, but we can use the sympathy that they have for us to recruit their offspring, the youth today who are looking for an explanation of the defeats of yesterday. We can't compete on the level of agitation with the current leadership of the working class. But we can continue in our perspective of splits and fusions toward the organizations of the workers movement.

We try to keep ourselves going, independent of popular-frontist politics, with nine people. In the last two months, we have done numerous sales to spontaneous and semi-spontaneous strikes, the general strike of 14 October and a public assembly the day after on 15 October, on the class struggle. We have sold more than 2,000 pieces of literature of which most are Spartaco No. 44 (it doesn't seem to me that this is a Bordigist attitude).

And Spartaco No. 44 might not be up to date...but it is programmatic!

Spartaco is not directed to the masses but is communist propaganda; it says many programmatic things to few people. Real transitional demands can be expressed on the front page of a newspaper that organizes the masses or in a leaflet that says a few things to many people only as the tribune of a revolutionary party. Grisolia and Ferrando are pushed by the appetite to lead the masses and skip over steps, without a program that is independent of the popular front, and pressure the bureaucratic apparatus of RC, without a democratic-centralist structure or a programmatic newspaper of propaganda. I believe that Gino's position is a capitulation to the "tactic-ism" of the ITO and that he is on the road of Grisolia and Ferrando's shortcut, not on the road of Lenin and Trotsky!

On Bordigism

Gino says that the essence of Bordigism is very simple: "it is enough to say always and everywhere the same things." He quotes a letter of Trotsky against the Italian Bordigist group Prometeo, whose principal characteristic was that of denying revolutionary-democratic slogans (for example, the use of the elections by revolutionaries) and not that of always saying the same things! Is there somebody in the LTD'I who agrees with the politics of Prometeo?

Instead, I know somebody who thinks exactly like Gino regarding our capacity to translate strategic formulas into a tactical solution. This somebody is the ITO. As luck would have it, when I

asked Alberto M. what in his opinion are the biggest differences that he sees between our programs, he expressed exactly this opinion: "that we don't understand absolutely anything about transitional demands." I wonder when we meet, who is recruiting whom?

A non-declared factional struggle

In spite of the fact that Gino doesn't like to recognize it, his document is full of crude generalizations. What he has done since the local meeting of 29 September and at every successive executive or local meeting after that is that he hasn't acted as part of the leadership but as a not-openly-declared factional opposition against a leadership that is presumed to be "sectarian" and which he has labeled as having the program of the Bordigists.

This irresponsible attitude has thrown the younger comrades into confusion and insecurity when they need more than ever to understand the programmatic differences, if these exist.

Anna and Carlo seem to be the demons responsible for the presumed aggravation of the "principal political problems of the LTD'I," problems that aren't even mentioned. The accusation of bureaucratism of Anna and Carlo that "blocked the writing of a leaflet draft in order to wait for an article from WV" is an escalation of opportunist lies and makes me doubt, as I said at the beginning, if there is an agreement on the motions that we voted in August.

All this time Gino has carried out an "opposition" with motions, continually posing the alternative: either you agree with my slogans or you are a Bordigist and you aren't a revolutionary. He has never picked up the telephone to report to the International a situation that must be in his opinion very critical for the section. Is this carrying out an honest political battle? Because we are above all part of a democratic-centralist International in the ICL.

Lastly, an observation on Walter's document. I believe I answered the question of the general strike. I very much regret that Walter didn't develop point No. 3 on the perspectives. Furthermore, regarding the last paragraph of the document where he appeals for more discussion, I must say that I believe that it doesn't do political clarity any good to make a bloc with a partner with whom he doesn't agree on the generalizations that "go too far." When things are not clear, it is better to remain independent and not underestimate the differences. The motion that Walter proposed for a vote at the local meeting to support the contents of Gino's report (therefore his document and its "generalizations") is a motion that he must take the political responsibility for.

Anna

POPULAR FRONT AND GENERAL STRIKE IN ITALY

by Jan Norden

The very sharp, profactional struggle in the LTd'I that broke out over the question of slogans and propaganda directed at the 14 October general strike reflects the fact that Italy has, for the last couple of years, been a focal point of the class struggle in Europe. As we have repeatedly written in our press, the collapse of Stalinism in East Europe and the Soviet Union has led to an increasing political class polarization in West Europe in the New World Disorder. Because the opportunities are greater in Italy and our own forces weaker than in our other European sections, the contradictions we face there are even more acute than elsewhere. But they are the same kind of problems, growing out of a need to reorient politically to a changed situation, that have given rise to repeated fights in Germany, an implosion at the top in France, and most recently the resignation (subsequently rescinded) of one of the leaders of the British section.

In the wake of a historic defeat of the world proletariat (the destruction of the degenerated/deformed workers states) some demoralized comrades have been affected by the bourgeois/reformist campaign propagating the supposed "death of communism"; yet paradoxically, the rightist thrust to cut corners on the revolutionary program comes in the face of real openings for us. It is excruciating that in Italy, where the popular front is most developed, thus creating enormous possibilities for a Trotskyist propaganda group to reach a wider audience with our proletarian opposition to this class-collaborationist coalitionism, our tiny forces should be politically paralyzed. This makes it all the more important to carefully analyze this fight and draw the lessons, which will have implications for the other sections of the ICL, particularly in Europe.

Over the last couple of years, there has been a pattern of impressionism on the part of the Italian leadership, particularly in the form of softness on the popular front, and accompanied by a very distinct undertone of antiinternationalism. This came to a head at the LTd'I's July 1993 conference, and in the quit by the section's main leader, Bruno, earlier this year. But the disorientation precedes this, and has been reflected in a whole series of disagreements and disputes. It was notable that the articles by comrade Bruce on the PCI's popular-front betrayals at the end of World War II ("Resistance and Betrayal: Italy 1943-45," WV No. 525, 26 April 1991; and "1948 the Turning Point: The CIA in Cold War Italy," WV No. 554, 26 June), which one would think would be of great use in recruiting out of the Stalinist and ex-Stalinist milieu, met with grudging indifference from the LTd'I leadership. And the warnings about the bonapartist threat emanating from key sections of the ruling class (see "Italian Capitalists Demand Strong State," in WV No. 554) were only presented in a much watered-down form in Spartaco.

In a letter to the LTd'I last year (27 December 1993), I tried to lay out some of the background to developments in Italy seen from an international perspective. But trying to get any of this incorporated into the LTd'I's propaganda was like pulling teeth. Comrade Gino, in particular, and Walter as well, have repeatedly downplayed the linked questions of the popular front and of the bourgeoisie's drive to a "strong state," often to the point of disappearing them altogether. This was most vividly the case in the draft article by Gino on Italian students last December, written the day after a coalition led by the PDS won the mayoralties of five major cities, in which the popular front was never once mentioned. Instead the draft had a lot of fascism-mongering, which just happened to be the electoral theme of the PDS-led coalition in those elections. Again in the draft article on Italy for Spartaco this past July, there was no mention of the strong state, even as Berlusconi was trying to straitjacket the judges. Instead there was talk of a "telefascist government coalition," a phrase taken straight from the rhetoric of the "pole of the progressives."

What's striking is that the view of events in Italy presented by Gino and to a degree by Walter is a reflection at one remove of the vision of the reformist leaderships. The workers have been acutely aware of the bonapartist threat, witness the signs in recent demonstrations against the "Neo-Duce" and "Berlusconi." They see that the attacks on the corruption-ridden parliament are coupled with a determination by key sectors of the bourgeoisie to get rid of hard-won union gains. The PDS and Rifondazione Comunista (RC) haven't said much about the danger of a strong state because they are offering themselves up to administer it on behalf of Agnelli & Co. and in tandem with (Christian) "democratic" sectors of the bourgeoisie. And since the PDS and RC don't talk about it, this was treated as a non-question by Gino as well. That's why the article on "Italy: Popular Frontism and the Strong State" (excerpted in WV Nos. 609 and 610, 28 October and 11 November) was written in New York--Walter said they couldn't see how to use the material.

Although it has been expressed in different forms, behind the impressionism, behind the objections to intervention by the I.S. on propaganda for Italy, is a capitulation to the popular front. In the particular case of the flyer for a forum following the 14 October general strike, the initial draft sent to New York (1 October) had the main headline: "For An Authentic General Strike to Defeat the Financial Law." (The superhead, "Break with the Class-Collaborationist Politics of the PDS and RC," was about as concrete as a priest calling to renounce sin.) There was no mention of the popular front or of the strong state, which ought to be the axis of our propaganda in this period in Italy. Why this notable absence? Gino writes in his document of 25 October that he was pushing for a leaflet because the paper had been superseded:

"Unfortunately the article on Italy in Spartaco 44 was written in August, when there wasn't any class struggle. In fact one of the problems of the article was that it didn't deal with

what the working class was doing, because at the time there weren't any mobilizations."

To begin with, this is simply false. Early on in the article, a paragraph was inserted: "Now, at the beginning of September, a battle is looming over the government's plans to drastically slash pensions.... This is a showdown for the entire workers movement." It went on to say that the union tops talked of a "hot autumn" were begging for negotiations while the ranks were already launching "preventive" strikes. After drawing a comparison with the Air France strikers and French youth whose protests stopped a sub-minimum wage, it concluded: "In Italy, as in France and throughout Europe and the world, the key question is leadership, the need for a revolutionary vanguard, a Leninist-Trotskyist party...." The end of the article was an extensive discussion of transitional demands to turn workers' defensive struggles in the direction of a struggle for workers revolution. But for Gino, none of this has anything to do with class struggle.

Beyond this there was the pretended agitational character of Gino's conception. The draft flyer turns out to have been a rotten compromise. According to Gino, he wanted a leaflet to bring the article in Spartaco No. 44 "up to date," with the axis on an "all-out general strike," while Anna wanted something consisting only of slogans "centered on no confidence in the popular front." I have my own objections to the content of the leaflet as it came out, which had a very abstract quality and could have been written any time in the last six months. In particular, I think it was wrong to drop any mention of a general strike in the slogans. Moreover, in hindsight, it was undoubtedly a mistake to put out a flyer consisting only of slogans directed at the massive strike demonstrations, for that necessarily had an agitational character entirely inappropriate for a group of less than ten people.

But above all, I want to deal with Gino's argument that the axis of intervention for Trotskyists in Italy today should be an agitational call for an "unlimited" or "authentic" general strike. For that is what he is saying. Look at what he doesn't like about what we have written on the general strike. In his 25 October document, Gino writes that the WV 609 article on the Italian general strike was "highly unsatisfactory," without saying what is unsatisfactory. His motion at the Milano local meeting of 27 October proclaims the WV article "insufficient" as a basis for a leaflet on the mobilizations against the budget, again without saying why. Finally, in his letter to Alison of 13 November, Gino spells it out: aside from being "written for an American audience," and therefore "too descriptive," the article is deemed inadequate as a basis for a Spartaco leaflet because, "The treatment of the general strike is correct in the abstract, but it does not propagandize in favor of the general strike. That is, it doesn't have the central slogans, and the argumentation for them, that in my view we must have."

What the article said, "in the abstract," was:

"A real, unlimited general strike would pose the question of power, particularly amid the turmoil of this 'hot autumn' of class struggle in Italy. But by itself it would not resolve that question. There has never been a lack of militancy in the Italian working class. The key question is that of revolutionary leadership....

"What's needed to sweep away the Berlusconi government and smash his austerity program is all-out workers resistance, including strikes, plant occupations, the formation of workers councils and workers militias. This would pose a situation of dual power. And a genuinely Bolshevik vanguard party must be built in order to lead the workers' struggles beyond economic militancy in the direction of a fight for workers rule. For otherwise, decisive sectors of the Italian bourgeoisie are pushing for a 'strong state' to destroy the workers' gains, whether under the aspiring Bonaparte Berlusconi...or the 'progressive' popular front led by the PDS."

--"General Strike Rocks Italy," WV No. 609, 28 October

It is this presentation of the need for a transitional program leading to socialist revolution that Gino objects to. As Alison underlines in her document, "For a Fighting Propaganda Group in Italy! Build the LTd'I" (7 November), "to agitate for a general strike in Italy today, as Gino does, is nothing but pseudo-revolutionary phrasemongering--a grandstand play to look radical." In the present circumstances, this amounts to a disguised support for a popular-front government.

The question is by no means academic. After the massive 14 October four-hour strike and demonstrations, after the union-called "march on Rome" of 12 November of over a million and a half people, the battle over Berlusconi's pension-slashing austerity budget continues to rage. A new "general strike" (this time for eight hours) has been called by the unions for 2 December, as walkouts by industrial workers and clashes with the police by demonstrating students spread up and down the peninsula. Meanwhile, the reformist union and party tops are working feverishly to use this mobilization as pressure to expand the "progressive" popular front ever further to the right--to the Christian Democratic leftovers of the PPI and the racist populists of the Northern League.

Gino and His Political Brothers:
Popular Frontism Under Syndicalist Colors

At the 27 October LTd'I local meeting, Gino presented a motion to prepare a leaflet for the 12 November mobilizations in Rome centered on the call for an "Unlimited general strike against Berlusconi's Austerity!" This is the only concrete call; it is accompanied by general slogans for building a Bolshevik party, for a workers government and against class collaboration, which for Trotskyists amounts to "motherhood and apple pie." Gino's motion does not even mention the popular front or the bonapartist threat. Nor does it call for workers defense guards or defense of immigrants, or for elected strike committees that could become workers

councils. This is not window dressing. At times, Trotskyists will issue agitational calls for a general strike, particularly when the ranks are pushing for it and the reformist misleaders are resisting it. But even then, this must be accompanied by a broader program to deal with the questions that an "authentic general strike" would pose: the questions of revolutionary leadership and class power.

Underlining the agitational character of his call, Gino writes in his 25 October document: "In my opinion, it is necessary to have the marching orders for an unlimited general strike against the financial law." In the first place, our tiny group is not in a position to issue "marching orders" to the Italian working class. We can and must put out propaganda with a program saying what is necessary for the working class to do. But beyond this, it would be wrong for a Trotskyist propaganda group several times our size to center our intervention today on the question of a general strike. The government's austerity offensive against the working class has the support of the entire bourgeoisie. In fact, Berlusconi's hard-line austerity program was urged on him by Fiat boss Agnelli at a dinner with Italy's top capitalists in late September. Moreover, the reformist leaders actually support the cutbacks, only seeking to sugarcoat them. The concerted ruling-class offensive is not going to be defeated by calling a bigger and better general strike.

As Trotsky repeatedly insisted, any "authentic" general strike, not just a four- or eight-hour demonstration, would pose the question of state power. And we must spell out what that means in our propaganda directed at the most advanced layers of workers and youth. In her 2 November response to Gino, Anna shows how his line fits into the reformist-centrist sliding scale of general strikes, with RC leader Bertinotti advocating "General strike; 35 years 35 hours," i.e., a pension after 35 years and a 35-hour work week; meanwhile RC dissidents Ferrando and Grisolia call "For a real general strike, for a real alternative." Moreover, since the CGIL-CISL-UIL strike of 14 October was only four hours and the 2 December strike is to be 8 hours, according to the yardstick of Gino and his political brothers, the reformist union tops are at least headed in the right direction. Perhaps, like La Repubblica editor Eugenio Scalfari, they think that if the workers stayed out "for two whole days," then "any government would fall like a house of cards." But what then?

That underlines why we must focus on fighting politically against the popular front. The PDS and RC leaders are already preparing to sell out the announced 2 December general strike by negotiating to form a corridor coalition with Bossi's racist-populist Northern League and Buttiglione's Popular Party (PPI). Not the "pole of the progressives" this time, but a "liberal-democratic pole"! Following the beating taken by Berlusconi's Forza Italia in the 20 November municipal elections, when the PDS and PPI ran successful joint slates in several cities, PDS leader D'Alema declared that such an alliance "could be an axis for a government to get out of this crisis." Then, following the Milano

judges' 22 November announcement that the head of government would be questioned on corruption charges, D'Alema, Buttiglione and Bossi joined, after speaking with President Scalfaro, in calling for Berlusconi to resign and for a "caretaker" government to be formed after the budget is passed. "The financial law [budget] is the priority," said D'Alema. La Repubblica (23 November) lays out the PDS leader's scenario:

"In the meeting with the unions, Berlusconi should resume the dialogue, also to avoid the strike of 2 December. Then, in the Senate, get rid of the heaviest articles on the pensions; in this case, the PDS is ready to do its part. Finally, checkmate: the cavaliere [Berlusconi] throws in the towel. And then? 'A scrutiny will be held of all the political forces' to see if in this parliament 'the conditions exist to give birth to a serious government'...to carry out the 'indispensable reforms of the institutions and the rules of the game'."

So the austerity budget would be approved; the PDS agrees in advance to a "reform" that would slash pensions, just not quite so drastically; and the way would be open for a "center-left" cabinet through parliamentary reshuffling: this is the program that the reformists have been pushing for with the general strikes and demonstrations. This only underlines that the key to success of any workers' resistance today is to break with the popular front.

Moreover, particularly in the case of a regime with pronounced bonapartist appetites like this one, the question of power will likely be posed with attempts at heavy repression of the workers, from the army (under orders from Berlusconi's Fininvest lieutenant, now defense minister, Cesare Previti) and the paramilitary carabinieri; from Berlusconi's fellow coup plotters of the P-2 "Masonic lodge," still well-placed in the secret services; from police death squads like the "Armed Falange" and from Fini's fascist squads. Revolutionaries must warn the working class, and propose measures to meet this (workers defense groups leading to workers militia). As well, the need to break the bureaucratic barriers to mobilizing the power of the entire working class must be addressed by calling for elected strike committees. These can be transformed in the course of sharp class battles into factory committees and the nucleus of workers councils. Defense of immigrants, today immediate targets of attacks by the rightist-populists and fascist terrorists, must have a prominent place in a program of working-class struggle.

In addition, with tens and hundreds of thousands of youth in the streets, fighting together with the working class, defense of free, quality secular education must figure prominently, particularly as PDS leaders are meeting with the pope and promising to support Catholic schools. Mobilizing in defense of the right of abortion is also a burning issue, in the face of the threat from anti-abortion clerical reactionaries, many of them female, like Irene Pivetti, the Mussolini-loving head of the Chamber of Deputies (who would play a pivotal role in forming a "caretaker" government such as the PDS seeks). In other words, the party must act not as

working-class sectoralists but as tribunes of the people, defending all the downtrodden and oppressed. To prepare the working class to fight to win the battles already under way, it is necessary to put forward a transitional program leading to the formation of a workers government based on workers councils. This is the perspective that should animate our propaganda in Italy today. While Gino mentions in passing some of these elements in his 25 October document (but nowhere else), this is window dressing. His line would feed the illusion that the battle can be won by a "real"/"unlimited" general strike.

In arguing that to call for a general strike is necessarily revolutionary and counterposed to class collaboration--and to buttress his claim that Spartaco No. 44 (with the lead headline, "You Can't Stop the Strong State With the Popular Front!") has been superseded--Gino imagines the retort of an imaginary "critical worker," who says: "You say that you can't defeat the strong state with class collaboration. Correct, but we are doing a general strike, not class collaboration!" Gino's claim that the advanced workers are already won over on the crucial issue of class collaboration is utter nonsense. Moreover, while Berlusconi and his loyal supporters vituperated against the strike, some pedigreed representatives of the bourgeoisie were far more sanguine. Interior Minister Maroni declared the strike "not only legitimate" but even "useful and opportune"--presumably as a safety valve to defuse working-class discontent. And on the eve of the strike, President Scalfaro met with the CGIL-CISL-UIL leaders to emphasize his support for the 1993 "July agreements" (in which the union tops agreed to wage cuts) and the "indispensable function" of the unions (Corriere della Sera, 13 October).

But don't take their word for it. Walter himself, in his document "On the General Strike Slogan" (11 November), writes that the slogan of an unlimited general strike must be "strictly linked" to "the firmest opposition to a pop-front government of the 'Progressisti'" because "otherwise it would be understood as a back-handed militant support to that kind of government" (my emphasis). Yes, in the present context, that is exactly how an agitational call for a general strike would be understood--and this isn't changed by tacking on a fig-leaf "opposition" to a government of the "progressives." Why? Because there is not today any force which is challenging the PDS/RC reformist leaderships, whose announced goal is to bring about a popular-front government.

The "general strike" is being used by the reformists as an extra-parliamentary pressure tactic to promote class collaboration. That is the reality, and every "critical worker" in Italy knows it. It is no accident that Grisolia/Ferrando and Bertinotti, who also call for some version of a more militant general strike, supported the "progressive pole" in the March elections. Gino would place us on the left end of a spectrum running continuously through to the reformist leadership, thus liquidating us as a revolutionary tendency fighting against the popular front.

Trotsky and the Trotskyists on the General Strike

Gino's second document, "Trotskyism and Its Detractors" (9 November), and his motion of the same date consist of a string of quotes appealing to the authority of Trotsky to back up his call for an "authentic general strike." In doing so, he grievously distorts Trotsky's arguments. Take his citing of "The Decisive Hour" (December 1938), in which Trotsky writes:

"The general strike is, by its very essence, a revolutionary means of struggle. In a general strike the proletariat assembles itself as a class against its class enemy. The use of the general strike is absolutely incompatible with the politics of the People's Front, which signifies alliance with the bourgeoisie, that is to say, the submission of the proletariat to the bourgeoisie."

According to Gino, Trotsky is saying here that to call for a general strike is ipso facto calling for a break with the popular front. The opposite is the case. Trotsky was polemicizing against CGT leader Jouhaux's proclamation of a 24-hour "general strike" whose purpose was to serve the popular front. Trotsky's article was not a call for a "real general strike" but an extensive political indictment of the popular front, whose leaders (Jouhaux, Blum, Thorez) had "done everything possible in order to assure the defeat of the strike."

Gino also cites the experience of the French Bolshevik-Leninists in the mid-1930s, which is indeed quite relevant, because here you had a small propaganda group in the midst of a very sharp political crisis. Moreover, the period was dominated by a growing bonapartist danger and the development of the popular front to head off a powerful workers mobilization against that threat. Trotsky and the Trotskyists did raise the need for a general strike repeatedly in this period. But even where they directly agitated for a general strike, they did so in a very different way than Gino wishes to do, not bandying about the slogan of a general strike in the manner of the anarchosyndicalists but explaining that this poses the question of power and emphasizing the need to prepare this struggle. Over and over, they stressed the need for workers councils (soviets) and workers militias.

Following an armed assault on parliament by fascists and royalists on 6 February 1934, which imposed the reactionary Doumergue government, the workers responded in an enormous united-front mobilization of 12 February, which far surpassed the expectations of its Stalinist and social-democratic initiators. On the eve of this riposte by the working-class forces, the Trotskyists of the Ligue Communiste wrote: "The reactionary wave mounts. We are entering the regime of the 'Strong State,' flanked by the fascist formations of the Croix de Feu [Cross of Fire] and others," whose purpose would be to "upend the workers parties, liquidate the public employees unions, reduce the Chamber of Deputies to a rump parliament, centralize the executive power of the state and enlarge the role of the police." The article concluded:

"Against this plan of aggression, the working class must

counterpose its plan for resistance, carefully worked out, developing at each stage precise demands and slogans for struggle. Today, the directive is clear: initial response to the installation of the Doumergue government: an effective general strike, a massive mustering of the proletariat, organization of the workers united front!"

--La Vérité, 10 February 1934 (reprinted in Pierre Naville, L'entre-deux guerres. La lutte des classes en France, 1926-1939 [1975])

Gino claims that in this entire period which was dominated by the formation of the popular front, "the policy of Trotsky turned on the slogan of the general strike and committees of action." This is wrong. While calling in specific situations for a general strike, Trotsky and his supporters repeatedly put forward a set of transitional demands leading to workers revolution. These can be found in the Ligue Communiste's "Program of Action for France" (June 1934) and the speech "From the CGT's Plan to the Conquest of Power" (March 1935), both substantially written by Trotsky. Neither of these so much as mention the general strike. And in his extensive article, "Whither France" (9 November 1934), Trotsky laid out a plan of struggle which, far from fetishizing the general strike, places it in the context of the struggle for power, calling for:

"A concentrated campaign in the working class press pounding steadily on the same key; real socialist speeches from the tribune of parliament, not by tame deputies but by leaders of the people; the utilization of every electoral campaign for revolutionary purposes; repeated meetings to which the masses come not merely to hear the speakers but to get the slogans and directives of the hour; the creation and strengthening of the workers' militia; well organized demonstrations driving the reactionary bands from the streets; protest strikes; an open campaign for the unification and enlargement of the trade union ranks under the banner of resolute class struggle; stubborn, carefully calculated activity to win the army over to the cause of the people; broader strikes; more powerful demonstrations; the general strike of toilers of town and country; a general offensive against the Bonapartist government for the workers' and peasants' power."

In "Once Again, Whither France" (March 1935), Trotsky deals at length with the Stalinists' playing around with the slogan of a general strike. Gino quotes the first part, in which Trotsky agrees with the need for a general strike:

"...the Central Committee of the Communist Party proposes the general strike for the struggle against the Bonapartist legislation of Doumergue-Flandin. With this we are in full accord. But we demand that the leaders of working class organizations themselves understand and explain to the masses the meaning of the general strike under the present conditions, as well as how it must be prepared."

But Gino doesn't mention what follows. Trotsky put particular emphasis on spelling out the need for strike pickets and a workers

militia. There are also sections on demands aimed at enlisting the peasantry, soldiers, women, youth. In a section on "The Program of the General Strike," Trotsky writes:

"To determine to what degree the masses are ripe for the general strike and at the same time to strengthen the militant mood of the masses, it is necessary to place before them a program of revolutionary action....

"Above all the tasks and partial demands of our epoch there stands the question of power. Since February 6, 1934, the question of power has been openly posed as a question of armed force....

"It is precisely because the present intermediate state regime is extremely unstable, that the general strike can achieve very great partial successes by forcing the government to take to the road of concessions on the question of the Bonapartist decree-laws, the two-year term of military service, etc. But such a success, extremely valuable and important in itself, will not re-establish the equilibrium of 'democracy': finance capital will redouble its subsidies to Fascism, and the question of power, perhaps after a brief interlude, will be posed with redoubled force.

"The fundamental importance of the general strike, independent of the partial successes which it may and then again may not provide, lies in the fact that it poses the question of power in a revolutionary manner. By shutting down the factories, transport, and generally all the means of communication, power stations, etc., the proletariat by this very act paralyzes not only production but also the government. The state power remains suspended in mid-air....

"Whatever may be the slogans and the motive for which the general strike is initiated, if it includes the genuine masses, and if these masses are quite resolved to struggle, the general strike inevitably poses before all the classes in the nation the question: Who will be the master?"

Neither here nor elsewhere did Trotsky simply call for a general strike, period. Rather, he emphasized that the task of the Bolshevik-Leninists is to prepare the vanguard and the masses for the steps to come.

No, Gino, Trotsky did not oppose the slogan of a general strike. But he did warn, emphatically, against its misuse, both by the reformists and by more radical anarchosyndicalist elements. And he emphasized the need to adjust the propaganda to the situation. Writing just after the French general strike which accompanied the installation of the Popular Front government of Léon Blum, in a letter to the Central Committee of the POI ("New Stage in the French Revolution," 21 June 1936), Trotsky stressed: "You popularized the general strike. The first experiment with it is accomplished. To repeat the slogan now, without definition or concretization, would be a mistake." Where Gino wanted go to the 14 October general strike with a leaflet headlined "For an Authentic General Strike," Trotsky wrote:

"Our agitation must have as its purpose not accelerating the outbreak of the second strike, but seriously preparing for it.

It is quite possible, even likely, that the anarchists and the inexperienced youth are now going to play with the slogan of the general strike. We must not let ourselves be dragged in that direction. On the contrary! We must emphasize the enormous tasks and difficulties of the undertaking. The precondition for the success of a new general strike is factory committees and soviets."

Not the Popular Front,
But All-Out Workers Resistance to Smash Berlusconi's Austerity!

Pretty consistently over the last couple of years, Gino has sought to trim our Trotskyist program to the pattern of the popular front. His attempt to reduce our intervention in the massive workers protests this fall to an agitational call for a general strike--and to present Trotsky as the best builder of the general strike--is only the latest chapter of this story. Comrades have correctly fought this tendency, which would liquidate our central fight for the political independence of the working class from the bourgeoisie and to forge a Bolshevik vanguard. However, I think that there has been an overreaction to Gino in the direction of opposing the slogan of a general strike in the absence of a revolutionary workers party. This has introduced confusion, as Simona describes, and makes it harder to win elements such as Walter who have perhaps been taken in by Gino's smokescreen of seemingly orthodox quotes.

I also think this affair was not handled well by the I.S. When the initial draft leaflet came in (1 October), I agreed with Helene in objecting to the main headline for an "authentic general strike," and noted the absence of any reference to the popular front or the strong state, of any call for workers defense guards and of worker/immigrant defense against racist attacks (as well as a misformulation of the workers government slogan as if workers councils already existed). My suggestion for a title was:

You Can't Stop the Strong State with the Popular Front!

FOR ALL-OUT WORKERS RESISTANCE TO SMASH BERLUSCONI'S AUSTERITY!

When a second version of the leaflet came in on October 5, with the strong state/popular front slogan as the main headline, I again argued for the above headline. And I raised it the following day, saying that while the call for a "real general strike" was wrong as the main title, it was not wrong to address a mass workers mobilization with a perspective to lead forward the struggle they were engaged in. I thought the general strike should be mentioned in the list of slogans below, and emphasized that we should deal with this carefully precisely because of Gino's opposition.

I didn't find out until almost three weeks later that as a result of a subsequent discussion of Helene, Alison and others in the I.S., which I hadn't known of, the slogan of a general strike had been dropped altogether. The cover sheet on the fax from Ital of the final version noted that--in addition to Gino, who wanted

the general strike as the headline--there were "differences/doubts/objections...mainly over dropping any reference to the general strike." Especially since there was a known difference of opinion within the I.S. on this question, there should have been a consultation on it at the time.

In the aftermath, I agree that it was wrong to have a flyer consisting of a few slogans directed at this strike and protest march, for in and of itself that implies an agitational perspective. However, it is utterly necessary to produce propaganda dealing with the current struggles, which could be based on the WV No. 609 article, amplifying the programmatic points, particularly on the general strike, in light of this discussion. This is essentially what was put forward in the motion by Anna at the Milano membership meeting of 27 October. The workers actions are the most extensive since the fall of 1992, and could begin to escape the control of the bureaucrats. The fight against fascist attacks also comes in this general framework. While I totally disagree with Gino that Spartaco No. 44 has been superseded by events, we do need to address these struggles and draw the lessons from them.

With tens and hundreds of thousands of workers striking and marching daily over the past month, as well as numerous actions by students, unemployed workers and pensioners, the situation in Italy today clearly calls for an all-out mobilization by the working class and its allies to smash the pension-slashing austerity program. The government can be defeated, and this would throw a giant spanner in the bourgeoisie's push for a strong state. A general strike, not a four-hour or eight-hour stoppage plus a parade but galvanizing the entire working class in sharp class struggle would be a necessary part of such a working-class mobilization. But that is only one element of a transitional program, and it must be prepared. Thus the demand for elected strike committees leading to factory committees and the germs of workers councils (soviets), as well as the call for workers militias, are key components in leading the struggle toward a fight for power. And the focus must be on the fight for the working class to break politically with the popular front.

But what do you do when the reformist traitors are in control of the workers movement? Do Leninists ever agitate for a general strike in the absence of a revolutionary party as a contender for leadership? In her document opposing Gino's call for an "unlimited general strike," Anna writes:

"A confrontation of class against class, like the unlimited general strike, implies the question of power. Without the revolutionary party this will inevitably end in a defeat for the working class; both if the bourgeoisie turns to the popular front (and it is for this that the reformists want to use it) or if they turn decisively to the fascists to lead."

And again later:

"To call for an unlimited general strike means to pose the question of power; to do it when the party doesn't exist is criminal."

Gino claims that this--along with Alison's statement (in her 7 November document) that the slogan for an "unlimited" general strike when no Leninist party exists is "truly theater of the absurd"--means that according to Anna and Alison "if general strikes are controlled by the leaderships, to call for a general strike is a capitulation to the popular front."

If he isn't just playing word games, implicitly Gino is saying that an "unlimited general strike" is the same thing as any "real" general strike. If what is meant by an "unlimited" general strike --the term that has been used for the Italian ad oltranza, which could also be translated as "all-out"--is an insurrectionary general strike, such as the anarchists and syndicalists preached, then it is certainly true that to call for the seizure of power without a revolutionary party is criminal. However, that does not exhaust the possibilities. As Trotsky wrote of the British general strike of 1926, every general strike "brings the question of power sharply to the forefront," but it does not equal the seizure of power. Trotsky stressed: "It is only one step from armed insurrection. This is why the general strike, more than any other form of class war, demands a clear, resolute, firm (i.e., a revolutionary) leadership" ("Where Is Britain Going?" May 1926). Only one step, but that is an important step.

Trotsky, in his article "The ILP and the Fourth International" (September 1935), quotes Engels' 3 November 1893 letter to Kautsky, which cautioned against an unserious attitude toward the general strike by the Austrian Social Democrats. In this letter, Engels wrote: "the political strike must either prove victorious immediately by the threat alone (as in Belgium, where the army was very shaky), or it must end in a colossal fiasco, or, finally, lead directly to the barricades." Trotsky warns against taking Engels' classification dogmatically, and noted the possibility of a general strike resulting from pressure from below. Referring to two local workers uprisings in France in 1935, he commented:

"The working class masses want to struggle. But the leadership applies the brakes, hoodwinks and demoralizes the workers. A general strike can flare up just as the movements flared up in Toulon and Brest. Under these conditions, independently of its immediate results, a general strike will not of course be a 'putsch' but a necessary stage in the mass struggle, the necessary means for casting off the treachery of the leadership and for creating within the working class itself the preliminary conditions for a victorious uprising."

It is particularly under these conditions, when pressure is building from the ranks for a general mobilization of the working class against attacks by the bourgeoisie and that pressure is being resisted by the bureaucrats, terrified of the consequences, that revolutionaries would call for an immediate general strike. Gino cites the above passage and the example of the French Trotskyists in this period to buttress his case. But is France in 1935-36 parallel to Italy in 1994? I would argue that the situation in the peninsula today is much closer to another variant raised by

Trotsky, "in which the leadership of the strike previously, i.e., without a struggle, arrives at an agreement with the class enemy as to the course and outcome of the strike" in order to "provide an outlet for the accumulated ire of the masses."

The reformist union tops in Italy were in control of the recent general strike and march on Rome. We noted in the WV article that "scarcely two years ago, in October 1992, the PDS reformists were being chased from speakers' platforms under a hail of coins and bolts from their own members, enraged by the sellout of hard-won union gains." But this October, the syndicalists of the COBAS (rank-and-file committees) were speaking from the same platforms as the CGIL-CISL-UIL bureaucrats--as were representatives of the police "union." The bourgeois press has noted this change as well: when CGIL chief Sergio Cofferati spoke outside Fiat's Mirafiori plant in Torino, the first time in years that a national union leader had spoken before the largest plant in Italy, La Repubblica (18 November) noted that this was "a convincing reversal" of his experience two years ago when "instead of requests for autographs he received vegetables, eggs, coins and chestnuts. The reception given to Cofferati undoubtedly is part of a new climate and relation between the unions and the workers."

I argued at the 30 October I.S. consultation on Italy that October 1992 was a time when it was correct to agitate for a general strike, as the LTD'I did, because the situation cried out for a mobilization of the working class against the assault on its gains, and the question of a nationwide strike was the focal point of an acute contradiction between the ranks and the pro-capitalist bureaucracy. Not to call for a general strike in that circumstance would have been to aid the reformist misleaders. In his document, "On the General Strike Slogan" (5 November), Walter lists a number of other occasions in which the LTD'I also called for a general strike. Without examining each case, I think this was probably appropriate in 1984, in the battle against Craxi's attack on the scala mobile, but other cases (e.g., 1989) are not so clear, and it may be that there has been some promiscuity in the Italian section in throwing around this slogan as a standard response to any major attack.

In any case, however, we would not call for an insurrectionary strike. In Britain in 1974, in the face of a draconian offensive by the Conservative Heath government against the labor movement (including imposing a three-day workweek, i.e., a lockout and 40 percent pay cut), we called for "a general strike for limited, defensive aims" centered on breaking the state wage controls and reversing the Tory lockout. In an article, "Why We Call for a General Strike in Britain Now" (WV No. 39, March 1974), we laid out the problem and our answer. I want to quote from it here at some length, because it shows how a small Leninist group would call for a general strike:

"Therefore we have a contradiction: the situation poses the need for a general strike, for mobilizing the entire organized working class to answer Heath's attacks; a general strike

poses the question of power and can easily lead to a revolutionary situation; and the present sellout union and Labour Party/Communist Party leaders will betray a general strike if it challenges capitalist state power. What to do?...

"It is indeed criminal for the leadership of a mass party to call a general strike while ruling out the possibility of revolution, since the government may force the question of state power on the strikers. It would likewise be criminal for a small revolutionary propaganda group to call for a general strike initiated by the reformist labor bureaucracy if the strike were intended to be insurrectionary, or if no organizational measures were advocated to enable rank-and-file opposition to the TUC to check and move to counter the inevitable attempts to sell out the strike by the reformist misleaders. We call on the TUC to launch the general strike because we do not see this measure as a propaganda demand in the distant future but as the necessary tactic at this moment; today only the TUC could launch a general strike. And we call for a limited, defensive general strike, to be organized through shop stewards committees, in order not to guarantee in advance that the strike will be sold out by the treacherous TUC leaders. We obviously cannot guarantee that such a strike will be successful, only that it has a good chance of success."

This call for a defensive general strike is a very different perspective from Gino's call for an "unlimited general strike."

To be clear, in 1974 we were calling for a general strike, which is not what the LTd'I should center its propaganda on today. With the bureaucrats (for now) firmly in the saddle, holding four- or eight-hour strikes and Saturday marches, to call for a "real" or "unlimited" general strike will necessarily be understood as--and would be--calling to expand what they are presently doing. That is exactly the recourse of social democrats who don't know what else to do--e.g., RC's Bertinotti and his tails, Grisolia and Ferrando. And a bigger or longer version of October 14 will not defeat the bourgeoisie's austerity assault on the workers. In the present circumstances, any number of actions--such as smashing a fascist attack with workers defense guards, militant factory occupations or localized workers revolts like Toulon and Brest in 1935--could have a greater impact in breaking the bureaucracy's stranglehold. That is why we must propagandize a transitional program emphasizing the measures necessary to lead the working class toward a struggle for power, centrally in politically breaking with the popular front and forging a Leninist-Trotskyist vanguard party.

In doing so, we should headline the call for working-class action: my suggestion was "For All-Out Workers Resistance to Smash Berlusconi's Austerity!" but there is no perfect formula. When Anna writes that "at this moment in the consciousness of everybody the general strike is a tool to pressure for a progressive popular front that throws out Berlusconi," she is certainly right that this is what the reformist and centrist left and union tops want, and that the masses understand this. But in massively coming out on

October 14 and again on November 2, and repeatedly in militant workers marches, blockades of the autostrade, student demonstrations and the like, there is also a fervent desire among millions of working people and youth to find a way to defeat the capitalist attack which spells ruin for their lives.

Of course we are addressing ourselves to the most conscious elements, but the more than 1,500 people who have bought Spartaco in recent demos will also be reading what we write to see what the Trotskyists propose to the working class. And we will not be able to overcome the polarization between militant syndicalism and class-collaborationist parliamentarism simply by repeating the call for a revolutionary party. Rather, we must in our propaganda draw this central conclusion out of the tasks posed before the working class, women, youth, immigrants and others in struggle against the capitalist system. If we don't present answers to the present felt needs of the masses, there won't be any starting point for the bridge to lead them to the program of workers revolution.

Build the LTd'I as a Section of the International Communist League

But the heart of the present fight in Italy is not about formulations over slogans in a leaflet. It is about the basic tasks of a fighting propaganda group, and about building the LTd'I as a section of the International Communist League. The reason there has been a series of interventions by the International Secretariat over the last couple years over propaganda in Italy is that the rapidly evolving political situation in the country has produced disorientation in the leadership. Gino argues that the LTd'I should be able to produce Trotskyist propaganda for the class struggle in Italy. That is exactly what we are fighting for. But what Gino means is something very different: he wants the international to keep its hands off propaganda for Italy. This is, of course, a classic social-democratic conception.

In requesting a report on the general strike from Carlo, which could then be the basis for an article in Italy on the workers' mobilizations, we sought to build on the fact that he has written a series of excellent political reports (e.g., in 1994 alone, on the mobilizations around April 25, on the confrontation with the fascists in Vicenza, on the attacks on Leoncavallo) which were never used in Spartaco, although there were severe political problems with virtually every one of the overblown treatises on Italian politics produced for the paper. And while the couple of paragraphs on the question of the general strike in the article that appeared in WV No. 609 were written in New York, Carlo's report on 14 October was not just "descriptive," as Gino sneeringly dismisses it. The entire end of the article is a polemic directed at supporters of the RC in general and Grisolia/Ferrando's Proposta in particular, which came straight from Carlo's report, with the addition of a point about the false polarization between popular-frontism and militant syndicalism that came from Jim.

One would think that this is the kind of international collaboration we strive for--particularly when Italy is the hot spot of class struggle in Europe--not nationally limited propaganda "prodotto d'Italia." But Gino has repeatedly denounced and/or ignored intervention from the I.S. on propaganda directed to Italy: e.g., "Anna and Carlo blocked the writing of a draft for the leaflet in order to wait for the WV article that would become our leaflet" (25 October 1994); or, "In any case we can't wait for all the answers to come from the I.S." (24 June 1993).

The broader issue of the use of the general strike in the interests of bourgeois parliamentarism has come up before. More than one comrade was reminded of when, in 1978, Chris K. got the Australian section to come out for a "general strike for new elections" in the midst of a wave of working-class protest against a vicious austerity budget by the Tory Fraser government. In that case, the I.S. also intervened, objecting that, even where the Australian Labor Party was not in a popular-front coalition, the effect of the call would have been to subordinate the workers' action to the parliamentary framework and thus prepare the way for a defeat.

But even if Gino was only interested in the lessons of Italian revolutionary history, he would have taken up the suggestion from the I.S. (proposed by Comrade Foster) that he do an article on the struggles of the "biennio rosso," the "red years" of 1920-22. And in doing so, he would have discovered an example that powerfully exposes what is wrong with his own line today.

A Page From Italian Working-Class History:
The Sciopero Legalitario of 1922

To call for a general strike is counterposed to the popular front, a general strike cannot serve the purposes of class collaboration, dixit Gino. But history has already, dramatically and tragically, refuted his argument. In fact, one of the most famous general strikes in Italian history--which, furthermore, was "unlimited" in duration--the "sciopero legalitario" (roughly, strike to uphold the law) of August 1922, was precisely intended to pressure for a class-collaborationist coalition government, and its ignominious collapse led straight to Mussolini's seizure of power with the march on Rome a few months later.

In his history of the Italian Communist Party, Paolo Spriano devotes a chapter to the failure of this strike. He shows how it was the reformist tops of the CGL who decided on the strike, that it came about when the "collaborationist" Turati, frustrated at his inability to achieve a center-left (Socialist-Popular Party) cabinet through parliamentary maneuvering, decided to use mass action as another means of pressure. On the eve of the strike, the Socialist parliamentary fraction voted for participation in the cabinet, and Turati himself had an interview with the king (like D'Alema's phone call with the president today). The reformist

leader spelled out his justification of the strike to a skeptical unionist:

"Turati: We look with approval on the strike...it is a force converging with our own to put the ship of state onto the right track....

"In short, we push from within and they from the outside.... Even our honest, sincere offer of collaboration was accepted in such a way that is being covered with ridicule.... Any push from the outside, as long as it is contained in certain limits, seems useful to me and should be supported."

--quoted in Paolo Spriano, Storia del Partito comunista italiano (1967), Vol. 1

The Communist Party at this point was a mess internally, split between the Bordiga group, whose hobby horse was parliamentary abstentionism and which opposed the united front, and the Torino group around Gramsci that focused on workers councils. But intervention from the Comintern did point the party in the right direction, particularly on the need to split from reformism and to fight centrism, and on the united front. In the summer of 1922, the PCI raised the slogan of a national general strike against the bourgeois offensive; however, far from focusing on this, they placed it in the framework of a broader fight for a workers and peasants government. This was laid out in a 2 July 1922 manifesto, issued just after a delegation of PCI leaders (including Bordiga and Gramsci) returned from Moscow:

"We Communists also have our slogan today: against collaboration. But we add that this slogan is worth nothing if it is not complemented in clear terms with the positive program of action. Against collaboration, which is betrayal and defeatism, but at the same time for the general struggle of the Italian proletariat against the bourgeois offensive, for the action of the workers and peasants against fascism on the terrain of their own offensive measures. This is the slogan of the Communists to the Italian proletariat."

--quoted in Relazione del Partito Comunista d'Italia al IV Congresso dell'Internazionale Comunista, Novembre 1922 (1976)

Although the moment was not favorable for an offensive struggle, the strike was "secretly" called for midnight, 31 July, by the Alliance of Labor, a united-front body, at the instigation of the reformists. The "secret" soon reached the fascists who prepared furiously for it. While the strike call ordered workers to "abstain from committing acts of violence," Mussolini's squads burned down the offices of unions, socialist newspapers and leftist parties throughout northern Italy, assassinating a number of workers. Even though the strike was ostensibly to support the state against the fascist menace, the official forces of "law and order" took the side of the squadristi against the workers. After four days, the strike ended in a rout, the "Caporetto" of the Italian workers movement, as it was dubbed. Gramsci commented later: "The catastrophe of the sciopero legalitario of August 1922 had as its sole result to push the industrialists and the crown toward fascism

and to make the Hon. Mussolini decide upon a coup d'état" (L'Ordinamento Nuovo, 1 March 1924).

We don't need a sciopero legalitario of 1994.

Jan Norden
29 November 1994

