

# **The Role of the United Front Tactic**

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# The Role of the United Front Tactic

*By Doug Lorimer*

The fundamental aim of the revolutionary Marxist party is to organise the socialist revolution. In order to realise this aim, the party must win the ideological and political allegiance of the overwhelming majority of the working class. This cannot be accomplished simply through propaganda alone. It is a general law of history that only through collective experiences of struggle, of action, can broad masses begin to free themselves from the domination of ruling class ideology and become receptive to revolutionary ideas.

In normal times, ruling class ideology dominates the consciousness of the masses not simply because the rulers' have control over the means of ideological production (the church, the schools, the mass media, etc.), but also because of the normal conditions of life of the labouring classes. In daily life, the masses are fatigued and brutalised through exploitation and the alienation of labour, as well through a lack of genuine leisure time.

Even when they sympathise with the idea of socialism, as broad masses have in many countries — sympathies reflected in electoral support for parties which proclaim their allegiance to socialism — this does not mean that they are imbued with a revolutionary consciousness. The normal conditions of life of the broad masses, in which they are the passive victims of exploitation and oppression, tend to imbue them with the idea that revolt is impossible and useless, that their enemies are simply too powerful to be defeated.

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Based on a talk presented to a Resistance leadership training school in Sydney on April 24-25, 1995. *Doug Lorimer* (1953-2013) was a longtime leader of the Democratic Socialist Party.

## **Mass action & revolutionary consciousness**

But in the heat of great mass mobilisations, of collective actions, these feelings of inferiority and powerlessness can suddenly disappear. The masses become conscious of their immense potential power as soon as they act together, collectively and in solidarity. That, of course, is why revolutionary Marxists attach extreme importance to collective action by the oppressed, to building mass actions. It is through mass actions that the oppressed begin to break with the obedient and servile behavior which has been inculcated into them from birth.

Furthermore, without large-scale mobilisations — strikes, rallies, street demonstrations, etc — the masses cannot effectively resist attacks by the capitalists and their governments on their living standards and democratic rights. The demoralisation and loss of confidence in their own strength that would follow from passive acceptance of such attacks would be highly damaging to the development of revolutionary consciousness among the masses and their vanguard elements. Thus, organising united action by the working class as a whole or whatever section of it can presently be won to struggle against the attacks of the capitalist rulers is an objective necessity that faces the party as a prerequisite for its future growth.

The revolutionary Marxist party invariably begins as, and in normal times can count in its ranks and among its followers, only a minority of the working class and the oppressed in general, sometimes a numerically insignificant minority in relation to the population as a whole. The majority of the working class and its potential allies — the students, the urban middle classes, the peasantry in those countries where it remains a significant section of the population — do not agree with the party's program and are not prepared to follow its call to action. They are under the influence of pro-capitalist leaderships who fear the potential radicalising effect of mass mobilisations and therefore have no desire to organise mass struggles.

How then can the party draw broad masses into collective action, into mass anti-capitalist struggles?

The tactic of the united front was put forward by the leadership of the Communist International under Lenin and Trotsky in 1921-22 to meet the challenge of this vital task facing the Communist parties of Europe. The workers' movement was dominated by petty-bourgeois reformist leaderships, generally the social-democrats, who were imbued with a thoroughly class-collaborationist and anti-revolutionary outlook. The Communist parties, which in most cases had been formed by revolutionary-minded forces that had broken away from the social-democratic parties in the wake of the 1917 Russian revolution, represented a minority of the politicised workers. The bourgeoisie was on the offensive against the living standards of the working class.

There was rising sentiment within the working class for common action to resist this offensive. The Comintern leadership proposed that the Communist parties in Europe should seek agreements with the reformists for united action in defence of the immediate needs of the working class.

This proposal was denounced at the time by ultraleft currents in the world Communist movement who saw it as a capitulation to reformism. Lenin and Trotsky demonstratively described themselves as representatives of the right wing of the Comintern in this debate to indicate their impatience with this sterile sectarianism, which rejected compromises with non-revolutionary forces as a matter of principle.

### Alliances & compromises

A year before the united front tactic was first formulated by the Comintern, Lenin had already rebutted the arguments of the ultralefts. In his pamphlet on Communist tactics, *'Left-Wing' Communism — An Infantile Disorder*, written in 1920, Lenin wrote:

Capitalism would not be capitalism if the proletariat were not surrounded by a large number of exceedingly motley types intermediate between the proletariat and the semi-proletarian (who earns his livelihood in part by the sale of his labour-power, between the semi-proletarian and the small peasant (and petty artisan, handicraft worker and small master in general), between the small peasant and the middle peasant, and so on, and if the proletariat itself were not divided into more developed and less developed strata, if it were not divided according to territorial origin, trade, sometimes according to religion, and so on. From all this follows the necessity, the absolute necessity, for the Communist Party, the vanguard of the proletariat, its class-conscious section, to resort to changes of tack, to conciliation and compromises with the various groups of proletarians, with the various parties of the workers and small masters. It is entirely a matter of knowing how to apply these tactics in order to raise — not lower — the general level of proletarian class-consciousness, revolutionary spirit, and ability to fight and win. Incidentally, it should be noted that the Bolsheviks' victory over the Mensheviks called for the application of tactics of changes of tack, conciliation and compromises, not only before but also after the October Revolution of 1917, but the changes of tack and compromises were, of course, such as assisted, boosted and consolidated the Bolsheviks at the expense of the Mensheviks. The petty-bourgeois democrats (including the Mensheviks) inevitably vacillate between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, between bourgeois democracy and the soviet system, between reformism and revolutionism, between love for the workers and fear of the proletarian dictatorship, etc. The Communists' proper tactics should consist in utilising these vacillations, not ignoring them; utilising them calls for concessions to elements that

are turning towards the proletariat — whenever and in the measure that they turn towards the proletariat — in addition to fighting those who turn towards the bourgeoisie. As a result of the application of the correct tactics, Menshevism began to disintegrate, and has been disintegrating more and more in our country; the stubbornly opportunist leaders are being isolated, and the best of the workers and the best elements among the petty-bourgeois democrats are being brought into our camp. This is a lengthy process, and the hasty “decision” — “No compromises, no manoeuvres” — can only prejudice the strengthening of the revolutionary proletariat’s influence and the enlargement of its forces.

In another section of his pamphlet, Lenin declared that “the entire history of Bolshevism, both before and after the October Revolution, is full of changes of tack, conciliatory tactics and compromises with other parties, including bourgeois parties!”

To carry out a war for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie, a war which is a hundred times more difficult, protracted and complex than the most stubborn of ordinary wars between states, and to renounce in advance any change of tack, or any utilisation of a conflict of interests ( even if temporary) among one’s enemies, or any conciliation or compromise with possible allies (even if they are temporary, unstable, vacillating or conditional allies) — is that not ridiculous in the extreme?...

The more powerful enemy can be vanquished only by exerting the utmost effort, and by the most thorough, careful, attentive, skilful and obligatory use of any, even the smallest, rift between the enemies, any conflict of interests among the bourgeoisie of the various countries and among the various groups or types of bourgeoisie within the various countries, and also by taking advantage of any, even the smallest, opportunity of winning a mass ally, even though this ally is temporary, vacillating, unstable, unreliable and conditional. Those who do not understand this reveal a failure to understand even the smallest grain of Marxism, of modern scientific socialism in general.

### Example of compromise

An example of what sort of compromises Lenin had in mind, was his suggestion, made in this pamphlet, for the British Communists to propose an agreement with the leaders of the Labour Party for an electoral alliance against the electoral alliance of the Liberal and Conservative parties.

The Communist Party [Lenin wrote] should propose the following “compromise” election agreement to the Hendersons and Snowdens: let us jointly fight against the alliance between Lloyd George and the Conservatives; let us share parliamentary seats in proportion to the number of workers’ votes polled for the Labour Party and for the

Communist Party (not in elections, but in a special ballot), and let us retain complete freedom of agitation, propaganda and political activity. Of course, without this latter condition, we cannot agree to a bloc, for that would be treachery; the British Communists must demand and get complete freedom to expose the Hendersons and Snowdens in the same way as (for fifteen years — 1903-17) the Russian Bolsheviks demanded and got it in respect of the Russian Hendersons and Snowdens, i.e., the Mensheviks.

If the Hendersons and Snowdens accept a bloc on these terms, we shall be the gainers, because the number of parliamentary seats is of no importance to us; we are not out for seats. We shall yield on this point. We shall be the gainers, because we shall carry our agitation among the masses at a time when Lloyd George himself has incensed them, and we shall not only be helping the Labour Party to establish its government sooner, but we shall also be helping the masses sooner to understand the communist propaganda that we shall carry out against the Hendersons, without any reticence or omission...

If the Hendersons and Snowdens reject a bloc with us on these terms, we shall gain still more, for we shall at one have shown the masses ... that the Hendersons prefer their close relations with the capitalists to the unity of all the workers.

While Lenin never used the term “united front” in this pamphlet, instead referring interchangeably to terms such as “bloc,” “alliance,” “agreements,” etc., it contains a rich exposition of the united front idea as applied throughout the whole history of the Marxist movement in Russia.

## **Marx & Engels on the united front**

Indeed, the idea of the united front, of a temporary alliance between Marxists and non-Marxists for joint action to attain commonly agreed on immediate objectives, has been part of the tactical arsenal of the Marxist movement since its formation in the middle of the 19th century. For example, this idea is contained in the March 1850 Address of the Central Committee of the Communist League, written by Marx and Engels. In this circular they outlined the tactics to be pursued by the Communists in Germany toward the petty-bourgeois democrats in the wake of the unsuccessful democratic revolution of 1848-49.

Marx and Engels noted that the mass movement had come “completely under the domination and leadership of the petty-bourgeois democrats,” and that the latter “offer their hand and strive for the establishment of a large opposition party which will embrace all shades of opinion” within the democratic movement, “that is, they strive to entangle the workers in a party organisation in which general social-democratic phrases predominate, and serve to conceal their special interests, and in which the

definite demands of the proletariat must not be brought forward the sake of beloved [social] peace.”

Such a union [Marx and Engels argued] would turn out solely to their advantage and altogether to the disadvantage of the proletariat. The proletariat would lose its whole independent, laboriously achieved position and once more be reduced to an appendage of official bourgeois democracy. This must, therefore, be most decisively rejected. Instead of once again stooping to serve as the applauding chorus of the bourgeois democrats, the workers, and above all the League, must exert themselves to establish an independent secret and public organisation of the workers’ party alongside the official democrats... In the case of a struggle against a common adversary no special union is required. As soon as such an adversary has to be fought directly, the interests of both parties, for the moment, coincide, and, as previously so also in the future, this alliance, calculated to last only for the moment, will come about of itself.”

Here we see formulated the fundamental idea of the united front, i.e., unity of action against a common adversary combined with opposition to the pro-capitalist program of one’s temporary allies. Indeed, in another passage, the circular presents this as the basic approach that the workers should take toward the petty-bourgeois democrats: “The relation of the revolutionary workers party to the petty-bourgeois democrats,” Marx and Engels wrote, “is this: it marches together with them against the faction which it aims at overthrowing, it opposes them in everything by which they seek to consolidate their position in their own interests.”

## Winning the masses

The most succinct statement of the united front tactic is a report adopted by the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) in March 1922. The report, which was written by Trotsky, dealt with the situation facing the Communist Party of France. The first part of the report provided a general exposition of the united front tactic, expanding on points made in the “Theses on the United Front” adopted by the ECCI in December 1921, which had also been written by Trotsky, and which were later endorsed by the Fourth World Congress of the Communist International in November 1922.

Since most comrades here will not have read these Comintern documents, I think it will be helpful to give some extensive quotes from Trotsky’s March 1922 report on the united front tactic:

The task of the Communist Party is to lead the proletarian revolution. In order to summon the proletariat for the direct conquest of power and to achieve the latter, the Communist Party must base itself on the overwhelming majority of the working class. So long as it does not hold this majority, the party must fight to win it.



The party can do so only if it is an absolutely independent organisation with a clear program and with strict internal discipline. That is why the party had to break ideologically and organisationally with the reformists and the centrists who do not strive for the proletarian revolution, who have neither the capacity nor the desire to prepare the masses for revolution, and who by their entire conduct thwart this work...

After assuring itself complete independence, and ideological homogeneity of its ranks, the Communist Party fights for influence over the majority of the working class...

But it is quite self-evident that the class life of the proletariat is not suspended during this preparatory period prior to the revolution. Clashes with industrialists, with the bourgeoisie, with the state power, on the initiative of one side or the other, run their due course.

In these clashes, insofar as they involve the living interests of the entire working class, or its majority, or this or that section, the working masses feel the need of unity in action — of unity in resisting the onslaught of capitalism or unity in taking the offensive against the latter. Any party which mechanically counterposes itself to this need of the working class for unity in action will unfailingly be condemned in the minds of workers.

Consequently, the question of the united front is not at all, both in point of origin and essence, a question of mutual relations between the Communist parliamentary fraction and that of the [social-democrats], or between the central committees of the two parties... The problem of the united front — despite the fact that a split is inevitable in this epoch between the political organisations basing themselves on the working class — grows out of the urgent need to secure for the working class the possibility of a united front in the struggle against capitalism.

For those who do not understand this task, the party is only a propaganda society and not an organisation for mass action...

... it is absolutely self-evident ... that those workers who still support the reformists and the centrists are vitally concerned in maintaining the highest material standards of living and the greatest possible freedom for struggle. We must consequently so devise our tactic as to prevent the Communist Party ... from turning into — and all the more so, from actually being — an organisational obstacle in the way of the present struggle of the proletariat.

Still more, the party must assume the initiative in securing unity in this current struggle. Only in this way will the party draw closer to those [workers who] do not as yet follow its leadership, which do not as yet trust it because they do not understand it. Only in this way can the party win them over...

If the Communist Party did not seek for organisational avenues to the end that at every given moment joint, coordinated actions between the Communists and the non-Communist (including Social-Democratic) working masses were made possible, it would have thereby laid bare its own incapacity to win over — on the basis of mass actions — the majority of the working class. It would degenerate into a society for Communist propaganda but never develop into a party for the conquest of power.

### **The united front & the reformist leaders**

“Does the united front extend only to the working masses or does it also include the opportunist leaders?” Trotsky asked.

The very posing of this question is the product of misunderstanding [Trotsky explained].

If we could simply unite the working masses around our own banner or around our practical current slogans, and skip over reformist organisations, whether party or trade union, that would of course, be the best thing in the world. But then the very question of the united front would not exist in its present form.

This point may seem rather obvious, but it was ignored by the Stalinist leadership of the Comintern in the early 1930s. The latter called for a “united front from below” with the Social-Democratic workers against the threat of fascism in Germany, that is, a “united front” that explicitly excluded the leaders of the organisations that these workers still adhered to. In effect, the Stalinists’ “united front from below” policy meant demanding that the Social-Democratic workers agree to accept the leadership of the Communist Party as the pre-condition for a common struggle against fascism. The ranks and supporters of the Social-Democratic Party, i.e., the majority of the organised workers, refused to accept the Stalinists’ bureaucratic ultimatum, thus enabling the Social-Democratic leaders to mask their unwillingness to engage in a struggle against fascism. It also provided an excuse for the Stalinists to limit their own “struggle” against fascism to empty phrase-mongering. As a result, the Nazis’ marched to power in Germany without meeting any resistance from the organised workers’ movement.

The united front tactic arises from the fact, as Trotsky pointed out in his 1922 report, “that certain and very important sections of the working class belong to reformist organisations or support them. Their present experience is still insufficient to enable them to leave the reformist organisations and to join us. It may be precisely after engaging in those mass activities which are on the order of the day, that a major change will take place in this connection. That is what we are striving for. But that is not how matters stand at present.” Trotsky went on to note that:

Today the organised portion of the working class is broken up into three formations.

One of them, the Communist, strives toward the social revolution and precisely because of this supports concurrently every movement, however, partial, of the toilers against the exploiters and against the bourgeois state.

Another grouping, the reformist, strives toward conciliation with the bourgeoisie. But in order not to lose their influence over the workers, they are compelled, against the innermost desires of the leaders, to support the partial movements of the exploited against the exploiters.

Finally, there is the third grouping, the centrists, who constantly vacillate between the other two, and who do not have an independent significance.

The circumstances thus make wholly possible joint actions on a whole series of vital questions between the workers united in these three respective organisations and the unorganised masses adhering to them.

The Communists, as has been said, not only must not oppose such actions but, on the contrary, must assume the initiative for them, precisely for the reason that the greater is the mass drawn into the movement, the higher its self-confidence rises, all the more self-confident will that mass movement be and all the more resolutely will it be capable of marching forward, however modest may be the initial slogans of struggle. And this means that the growth of the mass aspects of the movement revolutionises it, and creates much more favorable conditions for slogans, methods of struggle, and, in general, the leading role of the Communist Party.

The reformists fear the potential revolutionary spirit of the mass movement; their beloved arena is: the parliamentary tribune, the offices of trade unions, arbitration courts, Ministerial ante-chambers.

On the contrary, we are, apart from all other considerations, interested in dragging the reformists from their havens and placing them alongside of ourselves before the eyes of the struggling masses...

Unity of front consequently presupposes our readiness, within certain limits and on specific questions, to correlate in practice our actions with those of reformist organisations, to the extent to which the latter still express today the will of important sections of the embattled proletariat...

The policy aimed to secure the united front does not of course include in itself guarantees that actual unity in action will be obtained in all instances. On the contrary, in many cases and perhaps even in the majority of cases, organisational agreement will be only half attained or perhaps not at all. But it is necessary that the struggling masses should always be given the possibility of convincing themselves that the non-achievement of unity in action was not due to our formal irreconcilability but to the lack of real will to struggle on the part of the reformists.

In entering into agreements with other organisations, we naturally assume a certain discipline in action. But this discipline cannot be absolute in character. In the event that the reformists begin putting brakes on the struggle to the obvious detriment of the movement and act counter to the situation and the moods of the masses, we as an independent organisation always reserve the right to lead the struggle to the end, and this without our temporary semi-allies.

This may give rise to a new sharpening of the struggle between us and the reformists. But it will no longer involve a simple repetition of one and the same set of ideas in a shut-in circle but will signify — provided our tactic is correct — the extension of our influence over new, fresh groups of the proletariat...

Trotsky concluded the first part of his report, by reiterating the absolute necessity for the Communists to maintain their political independence in any united front:

We broke with the reformists and centrists in order to obtain complete freedom in criticising perfidy, betrayal, indecision and the half-way spirit in the labour movement. For this reason any sort of organisational agreement which restricts our freedom of criticism and agitation is absolutely unacceptable to us. We participate in a united front but do not for a single moment become dissolved in it. We function in the united front as an independent detachment. It is precisely in the course of struggle that the broad masses must learn from experience that we fight better than the others, that we see more clearly than the others, that we are more audacious and resolute. In this way, we shall bring closer the hour of the united revolutionary front under the undisputed Communist leadership.

From these excerpts from Trotsky's report it should be clear that the united front is not an end in itself, but a means for mobilising the masses, for winning influence over them, wresting them away from the political and organisational domination of reformist misleaderships. It is a party-building tactic.

## **No tactical blueprints**

For Marxists, there can be no tactical blueprints, good for all times and arenas of struggle. Tactics must always be concrete, i.e., devised to fit particular situations and relationships of forces.

But like all the tactics employed by revolutionary Marxists, the united front tactic must not be divorced from or run counter to our basic strategy — our overall, long-term plan — for organising a socialist revolution, i.e., building a revolutionary Marxist vanguard party with a mass base and mass influence in the working class. Therefore, the fundamental precondition for any united front is that the revolutionary Marxists retain their own independent organisation and their freedom to put forward their

own views, including criticism of their temporary allies. The essence of the united front tactic is therefore encapsulated in two phrases: “March separately, strike together!” and “Freedom of criticism, unity of action!”

The united front tactic was devised by the Comintern in 1921-22 to deal with a particular situation in the European labour movement, i.e., to bring about united action by the working class to resist the economic offensive of the bourgeoisie in a context where the Communist parties led a significant minority of the workers but where the majority of the workers still accepted the leadership of parties and organisations dominated by pro-capitalist leaderships.

The form that the united front tactic took at that time therefore focussed on achieving formal agreements for joint action between formally constituted organisations with mass influence in the working class. However, while the term “united front” first entered the terminology of the Marxist movement to describe this particular form of the united front, it should not be conceived of as being only applicable in this form. In organising a mass movement against the Vietnam War in the late 1960s and early 1970s, for example, revolutionary Marxists participated in a united front — the Vietnam Moratorium Campaign — that was a constantly shifting coalition of diverse organisations, groups and individuals, which only acted in unison to build and stage particular actions, principally a series of mass street marches. After each major action, the centrifugal tendencies inherent in so heterogeneous a formation threatened to make it fly apart. The only thing that held this united front together was the single issue of opposition to the war.

The forces involved in this united front coalition not only held widely differing views on just about every other social issue, they did not even agree on the how the common objective — ending the war — could be achieved.

We had to wage a constant struggle within the coalition against both the reformists and the ultraleft sectarians, over what the central demands of the movement should be and over what methods of action it should use. The reformists persistently sought to subordinate the movement to the electoral interests of the ALP while the ultralefts tried to divert it into meaningless confrontations with the cops. The reformists sought to focus the demands of the antiwar movement onto support for diplomatic negotiations between the imperialist aggressors and the Vietnamese liberation movement, or simply abstract appeals for peace. The ultralefts sought to have the movement adopt abstract revolutionary slogans such as “Smash US imperialism!” and “Victory to the NLF!” as its central mobilising demands. In neither case, were they concerned with mobilising the mass sentiment against the war into a powerful force that could actually aid the Vietnamese in the struggle to force the imperialist armies

out of their country.

The orientation of Resistance and the DSP, by contrast, was to consistently fight within the united front for mass demonstrations of public opposition to the war, principally mass rallies and street marches, and for the central mobilising demand of these demonstrations to be the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of US and Australian troops. The correctness of our approach was shown by the fact that VMC achieved its biggest successes in terms of mass mobilisation when this orientation — mass action around the immediate withdrawal demand — was adopted by the majority of the rank-and-file activists in the united front coalition, that is, in 1970 and 1971.

The form taken by the united front in opposition to the Vietnam War and many other united front coalitions that we have been involved in over the last two decades is obviously different from that envisaged by the Comintern in the early 1920s. They have not taken the form of formal agreements for joint action between revolutionary and reformist organisations with mass influence in the organised labour movement. This reflects the fact that the overwhelming majority of youth and others who have been radicalised since the 1960s have entered into political action outside the framework of the organised labour movement.

### **Fundamental purpose of united front tactic**

In any case, the united front tactic should not be focused exclusively on formal agreements between revolutionary Marxists and the reformist leaders of mass organisations. While such agreements may be necessary in order to draw broad masses into action, Marxists do not make their initiatives for mass action dependent on prior agreement with the reformist-led mass organisations. By themselves, or together with other left organisations or independent activists, Marxists should promote mobilisations.

Of course, in formulating the demands for such mobilisations and selecting the forms of action, we should seek to broaden involvement in the mobilisation as much as possible by including, where possible, members of the reformist-led mass organisations. This means that Marxists should endeavor to maintain a united-front approach to these organisations, even when the chances of achieving any united action with them is slight. In this way Marxists can demonstrate to those involved in the struggle that the lack of unity in struggle is not due to any sectarianism on our part, but to the unwillingness of the reformists to struggle against the ruling class.

The effectiveness of such an approach depends on Marxists avoiding a purely formal, declamatory application of the united front tactic, that is, calling on the reformists to join in a common struggle for demands which are alien to the actual situation and therefore find no response among broader forces, for example, calling

for a joint struggle for the nationalisation of the big monopolies when the immediate issue at hand is the need to resist an attack on women's access to abortion. By its very nature, the united front tactic can only be fruitful in exposing the unwillingness of the reformists to struggle if it is based on a realistic appraisal of the situation — of the immediate, basic interests and concerns of the masses.

Exposing the unwillingness of the reformists to lead a serious struggle in defence of the masses' immediate, basic interests, however, is only one aspect of the united front tactic. This point needs to be stressed because the united front tactic has often been mistakenly seen as having this as its sole, or main, purpose. Simply exposing the reformist leaders of mass organisations as cowardly and traitorous does not solve the key problem facing the revolutionary Marxist party — which is to win the ranks and followers of these mass organisations away from the political influence of the reformists and to bring them under our political influence and leadership. That is, the task is not only to break the political hold of the reformists over the masses, but to convince them to put their political confidence in the revolutionary Marxist party. To do this, we have to demonstrate to the masses, through their own experiences of struggle, that our program, tactics and leadership are better than those of the reformists.

The fundamental purpose of the united front tactic is not to expose the reformists as unreliable leaders. Rather, its fundamental purpose is to provide the most favorable conditions to enable the Marxists to demonstrate that they are better leaders than the reformists.

The united front tactic is simply an initiative by the revolutionary Marxists to get the workers and/or students who adhere to other parties, as well as the unaligned workers and students, to join in a common struggle with us to defend the immediate interests of the masses against the capitalist rulers. The united front allows for the most massive mobilisations around the most pressing issues of the day, and thus provides the most favorable conditions for revolutionary Marxists to demonstrate they are the best builders of the struggle.

This also means that whether or not a united front should be formed does not depend solely upon the fact that the revolutionary Marxist party and other organisations may agree on a particular issue, but upon whether the application of this tactic will assist the party in winning broader forces to its perspectives.

## **Demands & slogans**

In building united-front actions, we seek to have the united front concretise its aims by placing clear and specific demands upon the capitalist rulers or, in some circumstances, upon the reformist leaders of the mass organisations. Determination of the demand

or demands for a united-front action hinges a number of criteria: Do they address the concrete situation, i.e., the actual issue that has arisen at a given point in the class struggle? Do they meet, even if only in a partial way, the immediate, objective needs of the masses in relation to the specific problem that has been posed? Are they capable of mobilising the masses, i. e., do they relate to the existing level of consciousness and preparedness for struggle of the masses? Will the experience of struggle for these demands facilitate the masses in overcoming their illusions in the capitalist system?

As an example of these criteria, let's consider the different demands advocated by different currents in the movement against the Vietnam war. Up to 1968, the reformists — the ALP “lefts” and their Stalinist allies in the Communist Party — advocated that anti-war mobilisations demand negotiations. We opposed such a demand because:

- a. It did not meet the needs of the masses, particularly the Vietnamese masses. It implied support for the idea that the imperialist aggressors had a right to negotiate the affairs of the Vietnamese people, thus violating their right to national self-determination. Moreover, even if this demand was acceded to by the imperialists it would not end the war. In fact this is what happened — Washington agreed to enter into negotiations with the Vietnamese in 1968, and for four years afterward not only did the war continue, the imperialists' escalated its scope.
- b. The demand for negotiations had the capacity to mobilise broad masses in Australia in opposition to the war only so long as the imperialists refused to negotiate with the Vietnamese. If the anti-war movement made negotiations its central demand, the imperialists' could disorient the movement either by claiming to be for negotiations and blaming the Vietnamese for putting obstacles in the way of negotiations (which is what the imperialists' did in 1968), or by simply agreeing to negotiate
- c. The experience of mobilising for the demand for negotiations did not facilitate overcoming mass illusions in the lies of the imperialist governments. As a result, the anti-war movement was temporarily disoriented and demobilised in 1968-69 when Washington agreed to negotiations and launched a massive propaganda campaign claiming that this showed it was for a peaceful settlement of the war.

The ultralefts in the movement — the Maoist-led Worker-Student Alliance — advocated that anti-war mobilisations be built around slogans such as “Smash US imperialism!” and “Victory to the NLF!” We opposed building the mass anti-war mobilisations around such slogans because they had no capacity to mobilise the mass anti-war sentiment. At best they could only mobilise a small radical minority.

In contrast to the reformists' negotiations demand and the ultralefts' abstract sloganeering, we argued for the movement to have as its central demand the call for



the immediate withdrawal of US and Australian troops from Vietnam. This demand:

- a. Directly related to the immediate issue of concern — the war and how to end it;
- b. Met the immediate, objective needs of the masses, both in Vietnam and in Australia and the USA, to end war and allow the Vietnamese people to settle their own affairs;
- c. Was capable of mobilising the mass anti-war sentiment in direct opposition to the imperialist rulers' war policy, precisely because it presented a clear and straight-forward answer to the question of how to immediately end the war, and;
- d. It made it easier to explain to Australian workers and students that they had no interests in imperialist domination of Vietnam or any other Third World country, and more generally, that their interests were opposed to those of the imperialist rulers. This is because it put the blame for the war squarely where it belong, i.e., on the imperialist aggressors. A mass struggle to win this demand therefore facilitated the masses' overcoming of illusions in the capitalist system.

Earlier, I explained that we opposed the ultralefts' abstract sloganeering. This does not mean that we are opposed to "sloganeering." In fact, it may facilitate the popularisation of a demand to transform it into a slogan. For example, in the relation to the demand for immediate withdrawal of US and Australian troops from Vietnam, which is quite a mouthful, we popularised it by condensing it into the slogan "Troops Out Now!" or even just "Out Now!" In 1917, the Bolsheviks' popularised their basic program of the workers' control of industry, an end to Russia's involvement in the imperialist war, and the confiscation of the semi-feudal landed estates by the peasantry in a three word slogan: "Bread, Peace and Land!" They linked this with propaganda explaining the need for a transfer of political power from the bourgeois-landlord Provisional Government to the united-front type committees elected by the workers, soldiers and peasants — which they popularised in their agitation through the slogan, "All Power to the Soviets!" In these cases, the slogans put forward by revolutionary Marxists were not abstract, i.e., they were not divorced from, but directly addressed, the concrete issues of the day.

What's the difference between a demand and a slogan? A demand is a clearly formulated claim placed on one's opponent, which spells out exactly what you want your opponent to concede. A slogan is a short phrase or cry that identifies one's stand or policy. The word itself is derived from the Gaelic term for the distinctive battle-cries used by different Scottish Highland clans.

## The united front & coalition governments

The single-issue united front is the easiest to build and maintain. However, there may be circumstances where the united front tactic can be extended to building multi-issue

coalitions, such as electoral alliances or even the formation of governments. The Bolsheviks, for example, formed a coalition government with the left-wing of the peasant-based Socialist Revolutionary party after the October Revolution. In all cases though, the united front should serve the purpose of seeking to mobilise the masses in opposition to the capitalist ruling class.

There is an interesting article by Trotsky, written in November 1922, in which he discusses the possibility of the French Communists forming a united-front government with the “dissidents,” i.e., the Social-Democrats:

... if in a violent political crisis a powerful mobilisation of the workers in the country leads to elections resulting in a majority for the dissidents and the Communists, including the intermediate and sympathising groups, and the mood of the working masses does not permit the dissidents to make a bloc with the bourgeoisie against us, it will be possible, under these conditions, to form of a coalition workers' government constituting a necessary transition toward the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.

Trotsky then outlined another possible scenario for the formation of a united-front government between the parties based in the workers' movement, that is, the mobilisation of the working class against a fascist coup. “In putting up resistance to the fascist attack,” Trotsky wrote, “the reformist party of the working class could be drawn by the Communist Party onto the road of forming a workers' government by extraparliamentary means .”

In the latter case would we agree to form a coalition government with the dissidents?  
[Trotsky asked]

We would — if they still had a considerable following in the working class that could force them to break away from the bourgeoisie. Would this assure us against any betrayal by our allies in the government? Not at all. While working with them in the government to carry out the initial revolutionary steps, we would have to watch them just as vigilantly as we would watch an enemy; we would have to ceaselessly consolidate our political positions and our organisation, preserve our freedom of criticism with regard to our allies and weaken them by ceaselessly presenting new proposals that would break up the combination by driving them and more of the right-wing elements to split away.

Trotsky's discussion of the circumstances and conditions in which revolutionary Marxists might form a coalition government with the Social- Democrats became the official view of the Communist International a month later. In the “Theses on Comintern Tactics” adopted by the 4th Comintern congress, observed that the call for such a government “takes on its greatest importance in countries where the situation of

bourgeois society is particularly unstable, where the balance of forces between the workers' parties and the bourgeoisie places the question of government on the order of the day as a practical problem requiring immediate solution. In these countries the workers' government slogan follows inevitably from the entire united front tactic."

The parties of the Second International [the theses went on to state] are trying to rescue the situation in these countries by advocating and forming a coalition of the bourgeoisie and the Social Democrats.£.£. In place of a bourgeois/Social-Democratic coalition, whether open or disguised, Communists propose a united front involving all workers, and a coalition of all workers' parties around economic and political issues, which will fight and finally overthrow bourgeois power. Following a united struggle of all workers against the bourgeoisie, the entire state apparatus must pass into the hands of a workers' government, so strengthening the position of power held by the working class. The most elementary tasks of a workers' government must be to arm the proletariat, disarm the bourgeois counter-revolutionary organisations, bring in [workers'] control over production, shift the main burden of taxation onto the propertied classes and break the resistance of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie.

Such a workers' government, [it noted] is possible only if it is born out of the struggle of the masses and is supported by combative workers' organisations formed by the most oppressed sections of workers at grass-roots level.

Now, the question may be asked: Since the Social-Democratic leaders represent a bourgeois-reformist political current, what is the difference between a united-front government and a class-collaborationist coalition government, for example the Popular Front government formed by the Stalinists and the Social-Democrats in Spain in 1936? The distinction lies in their different methods of action and the different forces that they are based upon. A united front, including at the governmental level, is a coalition that aims to mobilise the masses in practical, common actions against the capitalist ruling class, and that therefore bases itself upon the "combative organisations" of the masses — the trade unions, elected strike committees and other committees oriented toward promoting mass action. A class-collaborationist alliance seeks to obtain its aims through collaboration with the capitalist rulers, with its liberal wing, and therefore bases itself on utilising the institutions of bourgeois democracy — parliaments, arbitration courts, etc. It seeks to obtain its aims by supporting one section of the bourgeoisie, one group of capitalist politicians, against another, within the framework of preserving the capitalist system.

## Concessions to allies

Inherently, the united-front tactic involves making concessions to non-revolutionary

allies. The nature and extent of such concessions must be weighed at each step to see how much can be conceded to preserve or broaden the alliance while maintaining its central purpose, which is to mobilise broader forces in anti-capitalist struggle and to enable the revolutionary Marxists to demonstrate in the course of such struggles the superiority of their ideas over those of their temporary allies.

There is a very useful discussion of this question by Lenin in an article written in April 1922 entitled “We Have Paid Too Much.” The Comintern was seeking to establish a united front with the Second International. The Social Democrats, without agreeing to any specific common actions, demanded a series of conditions for continuing the negotiations. The Comintern representatives to the negotiations reluctantly agreed. Lenin objected, not that the concessions as such were unprincipled but that nothing had been received in return.

Imagine [Lenin wrote] that a Communist has to enter premises in which agents of the bourgeoisie are carrying on their propaganda at a fairly large meeting of workers. Imagine also that the bourgeoisie demands from us a high price for admission to these premises. If the price has not been agreed to beforehand we must bargain, of course, in order not to impose too heavy a burden upon our party funds. If we pay too much for admission to these premises we shall undoubtedly commit an error. But it is better to pay a high price .£.£. than to reject the opportunity of speaking to workers who hitherto have been in the exclusive ‘possession’, so to speak, of the reformists, i.e., of the most loyal friends of the bourgeoisie.

## Democratic self-organisation

Finally, it needs to be borne in mind that for the united front tactic to be used most effectively, it must not be confined to agreements between the leaderships of organisations for joint action, but should be extended in various forms at the rank-and-file level. That is, the united front should involve local committees of activists oriented to building mass actions.

Democratic assemblies of strikers electing strike committees and every similar mechanism in other forms of mass action play a vital role in developing the self-organisation of the masses. In these assemblies the masses learn about self-government. The forms of organisation through which they conduct their mass struggles around immediate issues are thus the embryonic forms of the future soviets, the highest form of the united front and the basic form of democratic organisation of the future workers’ state. ■

*Resistance books*