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LENIN ON STRATEGY AND TACTICS

TONY CLIFF

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THE 20 years 1894-1914 saw an enormous growth in the maturity of the Russian labour movement. This development was a living school for tactics and strategy. Lenin, its greatest product, grew with the movement, influenced it, and was influenced by it. These two decades constituted a long preparation, for him and for the working class as a whole, for the greatest test in both tactics and strategy—that of the terrible slaughter of the war, and its termination by the revolution. The most intensive lessons of this preparatory period were provided by the 1905 Revolution and its aftermath.

Marxism—science and art

When the 1905 Russian Revolution broke out, Lenin hastened to study the military writings of Karl von Clausewitz, which influenced him considerably in formulating his political tactics and strategy.

Clausewitz, the great philosopher of war, who drew his inspiration from Napoleon, defined tactics as “the theory of the use of military forces in combat”, and strategy as “the theory of the use of combat for the object of the war”. Lenin defined the relation between revolutionary tactics and revolutionary strategy in terms very similar to those of Clausewitz.

The concept of tactics applies to measures that serve a single task or a single branch of the class struggle. Hence, Lenin speaks about the tactics needed, say, during the January days of 1905. He also speaks about trade union tactics, parliamentary tactics, and so on.

Revolutionary strategy encompasses a combination of tactics that, by their association and growth, lead to the working class conquest of power.

The Second International,¹ emerging during the period of the slow, organic, systematic growth of capitalism and the labour movement, in practice limited itself to the question of tactics: the tasks of the day-to-day struggle for reforms in the trade unions, in parliament, local government bodies, co-operatives, etc. The Russian revolutionary movement, which developed in very stormy times, when the direction of events was often rapidly changing, had to face up to the larger issue of strategy and its relation to tactics. No one was more competent to develop this question than Lenin, who knew better than anyone else how to raise Marxism from the level of a science to that of an art.

Marxism is constantly referred to as a science, but as a guide to action, it must also be an art. Science deals with what exists, while art teaches us how to act. Lenin's main contribution is in developing Marxism as an art. If Marx had died without participating in the founding of the First International he would still be Marx. If Lenin had died without establishing the Bolshevik Party, giving a lead in the 1905 and later in the 1917 Revolutions, and founding the Communist International, he would not have been Lenin.

To advance from theory to practice, from science to art, Lenin had to demonstrate the dialectical relation between them—what is common to both and what distinguishes one from the other.

“Our theory is not a dogma, but a guide to action,” Marx and Engels always said, ridiculing the mere memorising and repetition of “formulas” that at best are capable only of marking out general tasks which are necessarily modifiable by the concrete economic and political conditions of each particular period of the historical process.

1: The Second International was the grouping of socialist organisations in the run-up to the First World War. The outbreak of war, which saw many of these organisations supporting the war efforts of their governments, split this body and led Lenin to found the Third International (also called the Comintern or Communist International) after the 1917 Revolution—*editor's note*.

There is an enormous difference between the general laws of motion of society and the actual concrete historical conditions, for life is infinitely more complicated than any abstract theory. With so many factors interacting, book knowledge alone is no basis for a knowledge of reality. Lenin loved to repeat, “Theory, my friend, is grey, but green is the eternal tree of life.” Living reality is always richer in developments, in probabilities, in complications, than any theoretical concept or prognosis, and Lenin therefore derided those who turned Marxism into an icon: “An icon is something you pray to, something you cross yourself before, something you bow down to; but an icon has no effect on practical life and practical politics.”

The main obstacle to a non-dogmatic understanding of Marxism, to its use as a guide to action, is the inclination to substitute the abstract for the concrete. This is one of the most dangerous errors, especially in a pre-revolutionary or revolutionary situation, when historical development is erratic, full of jumps, retreats and sharp turns.

There is no such thing as abstract truth. Truth is always concrete...

...any abstract truth becomes an empty phrase if it is applied to any concrete situation. It is indisputable that “every strike conceals the hydra of the social revolution”. But it is nonsense to think that we can stride directly from a strike to the revolution...

...every general historical statement applied to a particular case without a special analysis of the conditions of that particular case becomes an empty phrase...

At the same time a clear scientific understanding of the general contours of historical development of the class struggle is essential for a revolutionary leader. He will not be able to keep his bearings and his confidence through the twists and turns of the struggle unless he has a general knowledge of economics and politics. Therefore Lenin repeated many times that strategy and tactics must be based “on an exact appraisal of the objective situation”, while at

the same time being “shaped after analysing class relations in their entirety”. In other words they must be based on a clear, confident, theoretical analysis—on science.

Theoretical scepticism is incompatible with revolutionary action. “The important thing is to be confident that the path chosen is the right one, this confidence multiplying a hundred-fold revolutionary energy and revolutionary enthusiasm, which can perform miracles.”

Without understanding the laws of historical development, one cannot maintain a persistent struggle. During the years of toil and disappointment, isolation and suffering, revolutionaries cannot survive without the conviction that their actions fit the requirements of historical advance. In order not to get lost on the twists and turns of the long road, one must stand firm ideologically. Theoretical scepticism and revolutionary relentlessness are not compatible. Lenin’s strength was that he always related theory to the processes of human development. He judged the importance of every theoretical notion in relation to practical needs. Likewise, he tested every practical step for its fit with Marxist theory. He combined theory and practice to perfection. It was hardly an exaggeration for the Bolshevik historian M N Pokrovsky to write, “You will not find in Lenin a single purely theoretical work; each has a propaganda aspect.”

Lenin believed in improvisation. But in order for this not to degenerate into simply the shifting impressions of the day, it had to be blended into a general perspective based on well thought out theory. Practice without theory must lead to uncertainty and errors. On the other hand, to study Marxism apart from the struggle is to divorce it from its mainspring—action—and to create useless book-worms. Practice is clarified by revolutionary theory, and theory is verified by practice. The Marxist traditions are assimilated in the minds and blood of men only by struggle.

Theory is the generalisation of the practice of the past. Hence, as Gramsci so well put it, “ideas are not born of other ideas, philosophies of other philosophies; they are a continually renewed expression of real historical development”. To adapt oneself to any new situation without losing one’s own identity, one needs unity of theory and practice.

Lenin knew that no revolutionary organisation can survive without a permanently creative ideological laboratory. He always tried to find an eventual political use for his research. But while he was actually engaged in it, he did not hesitate to take months at a time off from practical politics in order to immerse himself in the British Museum or the Bibliothèque Nationale.

The programme of the party—its basic principles—takes as a point of departure the historical potentialities of the working class, i.e. it is derived from the material conditions of society in general, and from the position of the working class within it in particular. Strategy and tactics, however, take as their point of departure not the material world as such, but the consciousness of the workers. If consciousness—what Marx called the ideological superstructure—reflected the material base directly, then tactics and strategy could be derived directly from the party programme. However, the derivation is in fact indirect, complicated, influenced by the traditions and experience of the workers, including the activities of the party itself. A revolutionary party in principle opposes the wages system, but tactically it is far from indifferent to the struggle of the workers for higher wages.

A revolutionary leadership needs not only an understanding of the struggle as a whole, but the capacity to put forward the right slogans at every turning point. These do not derive simply from the party programme, but must fit the circumstances, above all the moods and feelings of the masses, so that they can be used to lead the workers forward. Slogans must be appropriate not only to the general direction of the revolutionary movement, but also to the level of consciousness of the masses. Only through the application of the general line of the party does its real value become manifest. The organic unity of general theory and particular tactics was at the heart of Lenin's struggle and work style.

Without a programme a party cannot be an integral political organism capable of pursuing its line whatever turn events may take. Without a tactical line based on an appraisal of the current political situation and providing explicit answers to the "vexed problems" of our times, we might have a circle of theoreticians, but not a functioning political entity.

The only way to verify the correctness of a strategic plan, or a tactic, is by the test of practice, by checking it against the experience of the actual development of the class struggle:

Decisions made with regard to tactics must be verified as often as possible in the light of new political events. Such verification is necessary from the standpoint of both theory and practice: from the standpoint of theory in order to ascertain in fact whether the decisions taken have been correct, and what amendments to these decisions subsequent political events make necessary; from the standpoint of practice in order to learn how to use the decisions as a proper guide, to learn to consider them as directives for practical application.

In war, and especially in the class war in a revolutionary period, the unknowns, not only in the enemy camp, but also in one's own, are so numerous that sober analysis has to be accompanied by daring improvisation based largely on intuition, on an active, creative imagination:

Marxism differs from all other socialist theories in the remarkable way it combines complete scientific sobriety in the analysis of the objective state of affairs and the objective course of evolution, with the most emphatic recognition of the importance of the revolutionary energy, revolutionary creative genius and revolutionary initiative of the masses—and also, of course, of individuals, groups, organisations and parties that are able to discover an active contact with one or another class.

Lenin constantly stressed that it was necessary to be aware of the thoughts and sentiments of the masses, and he himself excelled in this. As Trotsky said, “The art of revolutionary leadership in its most critical moments consists nine-tenths of knowing how to sense the mood of the masses. An unexcelled ability to detect the mood of the masses was Lenin's greatest power.”

Only in the struggle itself can the party find out what the masses really think and are able to accomplish. Marxism accepts neither mechanistic determinism, fatalism, nor voluntaristic self-will. Its basis is materialistic dialectics and the principle that the masses discover their own abilities through action. There is nothing in common between Lenin's realism and pedestrian, passive *Realpolitik*. Against the latter must be counterposed, as Lenin put it, "the revolutionary dialectics of Marxist realism, which emphasise the urgent tasks of the advanced class, and discover in the existing state of things those elements that will lead to its overthrow". He was well aware that a sober assessment of the real forces is necessary, and that the revolutionary party itself is a central factor in the balance of forces.

The boldness of the party gives confidence to the workers, while irresoluteness may lead the masses into passivity and moods of depression. The only way to determine the balance of forces, and the willingness of the masses to struggle, is by action in which the party gives a lead.

As the revolutionary struggle develops and changes, one must beware of clinging to tactics that have outlasted their usefulness. The most dangerous, devastating mistake a revolutionary leader can commit is to become a captive of those formulae of his that were appropriate yesterday, but do not fit today's different balance of forces. Too often it happens that, when history takes a sharp turn, even progressive parties are for a time unable to adapt themselves to the new situation and repeat slogans that were formerly correct but have now lost all meaning—losing it as "suddenly" as the sharp turn in history was "sudden".

In revolutionary life, the question of timing is crucial. One must determine as exactly as possible the pace at which the revolution is developing. Without this, no realistic tactics are possible. In fact, one's perspectives regarding the tempo of events will never be absolutely accurate, and one will have to introduce, as quickly as possible, the necessary correction in timing.

For the tactics and strategy of the party to fit its general principles, they must be clear and straightforward. For the masses to understand the politics of the revolutionary party they must not be

overwhelmed by detail, distracting attention from the central core of party policy. The policy of the party must be expressed in a small number of simple and clear slogans. "A straight policy is the best policy. A policy based on principles is the most practical policy."

In the final analysis broad, principled politics are the only real, practical politics... Anybody who tackles the partial problems without having previously settled general problems, will inevitably and at every step "come up against" those general problems without himself realising it. To come up against them blindly in every individual case means to doom one's politics to the worst vacillation and lack of principle.

A line of conduct can and should be grounded in theory, in historical references, in an analysis of the entire political situation, etc. But in all these discussions the party of a class engaged in a struggle should never lose sight of the need for absolutely clear answers—which do not permit of a double interpretation—to concrete questions of our political conduct: "yes" or "no"? Should this or that be done right now, at the given moment, or should it not be done?

One must calculate the relation of forces extremely soberly and then, once a decision has been taken, act decisively. "There is no man more faint-hearted than I am, when I am working out a military plan," wrote Napoleon to General Berthier. "I exaggerate all dangers and all possible misfortunes... When my decision is taken everything is forgotten except what can assure its success."

After quoting this statement, Trotsky comments:

Except for the pose involved in the inappropriate word faint-hearted, the essence of this thought applies perfectly to Lenin. In deciding a problem of strategy he began by clothing the enemy with his own resolution and farsightedness. The tactical mistakes of Lenin were for the most part by-products of his strategic power.

The formulation of a bold design on the basis of the least favourable premises was characteristic of Lenin.

“Seizing the key link”

Lenin teaches us that in the complicated chain of political action one must always identify the central link at the moment in question, in order to seize it and give direction to the whole chain.

Every question “runs in a vicious circle” because political life as a whole is an endless chain consisting of an infinite number of links. The whole art of politics lies in finding and taking as firm a grip as we can of the link that is least likely to be struck from our hands, the one that is most important at the given moment, the one that most of all guarantees its possessor the possession of the whole chain.

He often returned to this metaphor and in practice always obeyed the rule that it illustrated; during the most critical periods he was able to set aside all the secondary factors and grasp the most central one. He brushed aside anything that could directly or indirectly divert him from the main issue. As Trotsky aptly put it:

When the critical hurdle was happily cleared, Lenin would still now and again exclaim, “And yet we quite forgot to do this or that...” Or “We missed an opportunity because we were so preoccupied by the main thing...” Someone would answer him: “But this question had been posed, and this proposal had been made, only you did not want to hear anything!”

“Didn’t I? Impossible!” he would say, “and I don’t remember a thing.”

At that point he would burst out laughing, with malicious laughter in which there was an admission of “guilt”; and he would make a characteristic gesture of raising his arm and moving it helplessly down, as if resigned: well, one cannot do everything.

This “shortcoming” of his was only the obverse side of his talent to mobilise, to the utmost degree, all his inner forces. Precisely this talent made of him the greatest revolutionary in history.

Lenin did commit tactical errors—largely because of his concentration on the essential link and because of his long absences from the scene of action. But the other side of the coin was his magnificent strategic grasp. Party strategy was ruthlessly defined from a distance, even if tactical errors of judgement were involved.

In principle, Lenin was right when he insisted on “bending the stick”, one day in one direction, another in the opposite. If all aspects of the workers’ movement had been equally developed, if balanced growth had been the rule, then “stick bending” would have a deleterious effect on the movement. But in real life, the law of uneven development dominates. One aspect of the movement is decisive at any particular time. The key obstacle to advance may be a lack of party cadres, or, on the contrary, the conservatism of the party cadres may cause them to lag behind the advanced section of the class. Perfect synchronisation of all elements would obviate the need for “bending sticks”, but would also render a revolutionary party or a revolutionary leadership superfluous.

Intuition and courage

The most sober evaluation of the objective situation does not in itself suffice to develop a revolutionary strategy and tactics. Above all, a revolutionary leader must be endowed with a very keen intuitive sense.

In a revolutionary situation, where so much is unknown and so much is open to chance, to complications, a strong will is not enough. What is necessary is the capacity to grasp the whole situation quickly, so as to be able to distinguish the essential from the inessential, to fill in the missing parts of the picture. Every revolution is an equation with many unknowns. Hence, a revolutionary leader has to be endowed with a highly realistic imagination.

Apart from a very short interruption in 1905, Lenin spent the 15 years preceding the revolution abroad. His feeling for reality, his grasp

of the mood of the workers, did not diminish over time, but increased. His realistic imagination was rooted in deep theoretical understanding, a good memory, and creative thinking. It was nourished by occasional meetings with individuals who came to see him in exile.

Krupskaya was absolutely right when she wrote, "Ilyich always had a kind of special instinct—a profound comprehension as to what the working class was experiencing at a given moment." Intuition is especially vital in grasping the feelings of the masses at the most dramatic points of history, and Lenin excelled in this. "The ability to think and feel for and with the masses was characteristic of him to the highest degree, especially at the great political turning points."

Once the decision on certain tactics has been taken, the revolutionary leader must show no hesitation; he must have supreme courage. In this, Lenin was certainly not lacking; M N Pokrovsky well describes this characteristic quality:

Now, when we are looking into the past, it seems to me that one of the basic characteristics of Lenin was his tremendous political courage. Political courage is not the same as bravery and defiance of danger. Among revolutionaries there has been no lack of brave people unafraid of the rope and the gallows or of Siberia. But these people were afraid of taking upon themselves the burden of great political decisions. It was always clear that Lenin never feared to take upon himself the responsibility for decisions, no matter how weighty. In this respect he would never shrink from any risk and took responsibility for moves which involved not only his person and the fate of his party, but also the fate of the whole country and, to a certain degree, the fate of the world revolution. This was so peculiar a phenomenon that he always had to begin his action with a very small group of people, because only very few were bold enough to follow him right from the start.

Many a "Marxist" has tried to avoid the obligation to reach important decisions by giving Marxism a fatalistic nature. This was characteristic of the Mensheviks. In every crisis, they showed doubt,

hesitation and fear. A revolution, however, is the most ruthless method of solving social questions. And indecisiveness is the worst possible condition at a time of revolution. Lenin was the most consistent of revolutionaries. He was supreme in his boldness of decision, in his readiness to assume responsibility for the greatest actions.

The party as a school of strategy and tactics

Questions of revolutionary strategy and tactics held a meaning for Lenin only if the possibility of implementing them, through the revolutionary party, was a real one. He saw the party as a school for strategy and tactics, a combat organisation for the conquest of power by the working class.

How can the revolutionary leadership learn from the masses and know what they think and feel, unless it forms an integral part of these masses, listening to them at their workplaces, in the streets, in their homes, in their eating places? To teach the masses, the leadership must learn from them. This Lenin believed and practised all his life.

The party must not lag behind the advanced section of the class. But it must not be so far ahead as to be out of reach. It must stand at its head and be rooted in it:

To be successful, all serious revolutionary work requires that the idea that revolutionaries are capable of playing the part only of the vanguard of the truly virile and advanced class must be understood and translated into action. A vanguard performs its task as vanguard only when it is able to avoid being isolated from the mass of the people it leads and is able really to lead the whole mass forward.

The need for a revolutionary party is a reflection of the unevenness of consciousness in the working class. At the same time, however, the party exists in order to hasten the overcoming of this unevenness, by raising consciousness to the highest possible level. Adaptation to the average, or even to the lowest level of consciousness of the class is in the nature of opportunism. Organisational

independence and isolation from the most advanced section of the proletariat, on the other hand, is the road to sectarianism. Raising the advanced section to the highest possible level under the prevailing circumstances—this is the role of the really revolutionary party.

To learn from the masses, the party must also be able to learn from its own mistakes, to be very self-critical.

A political party's attitude towards its own mistakes is one of the most important and surest ways of judging how earnest the party is and how it fulfils in practice its obligations towards its class and the working people. Frankly acknowledging a mistake, ascertaining the reasons for it, and thrashing out the means of its rectification—that is the hallmark of a serious party; that is how it should perform its duties, and how it should educate and train its class, and then the masses.

The masses must be involved in correcting party mistakes. Thus on 21 January 1905, Lenin wrote:

We [party members] resort to secrecy from the Tsar and his bloodhounds while taking pains that the people should know everything about our party, about the shades of opinion within it, about the development of its programme and policy, that they should even know what this or that party congress delegate said at the congress in question.

He urged repeatedly that debate should not be limited to inner party circles, but should be carried on publicly so that non-party people could follow it:

Our party's serious illness is the growing pains of a mass party. For there can be no mass party, no party of a class, without full clarity of essential shadings, without open struggle between various tendencies, without informing the masses as to which leaders and which organisations of the party are pursuing this

or that line. Without this, a party worthy of the name cannot be built.

There is a dialectical relationship between democracy within the party and the party's roots in the class. Without a correct class policy and a party composed of proletarians, there is no possibility of healthy party democracy. Without a firm working class base, all talk of democracy and discipline in the party is meaningless verbiage. At the same time, without party democracy, without constant self-criticism, development of a correct class policy is impossible.

We have more than once already enunciated our theoretical views on the importance of discipline and on how this concept is to be understood in the party of the working class. We defined it as: unity of action, freedom of discussion and criticism. Only such discipline is worthy of the democratic party of the advanced class...

The proletariat does not recognise unity of action without freedom to discuss and criticise.

If democracy is essential in order to assimilate the experience of the struggle, centralism and discipline are necessary to lead the struggle. Firm organisational cohesion makes it possible for the party to act, to take initiatives, to direct the action of the masses. A party that is not confident in itself cannot win the confidence of the masses. Without a strong party leadership, having the power to act promptly and direct the activities of the members, a revolutionary party cannot exist. The party is a centralist organisation that leads a determined struggle for power. As such it needs iron discipline in action.

AGITATION AND PROPAGANDA

DUNCAN HALLAS

From *Socialist Worker Review* 68 (1984)

TO AGITATE is “to excite or stir it up”, according to the Oxford dictionary whereas propaganda is a “systematic scheme or concerted movement, for the propagation of some creed or doctrine”. These definitions are not a bad starting point. Agitation focuses on an immediate issue, seeking to “stir up” action around that issue. Propaganda is concerned with the more systematic exposition of ideas.

The pioneer Russian Marxist Plekhanov pointed out an important consequence of this distinction: “A propagandist presents many ideas to one or a few persons; an agitator presents only one or a few ideas, but presents them to a mass of people.” Like all such generalisations this one should not be taken too literally. Propaganda can, in favourable circumstances, reach thousands and tens of thousands. And the “mass of people” reached by agitation is a highly variable quantity. Nevertheless, the general point is sound.

Many ideas to the few

Lenin, in *What is to be Done?*, develops this idea:

The propagandist, dealing with, say, the question of unemployment, must explain the capitalistic nature of crises, the cause of their inevitability in modern society, the necessity for the transformation of this society into a socialist society, etc. In a word, he must present “many ideas”, so many indeed, that they will be understood as an integral whole by a (comparatively)

few persons. The agitator however, speaking on the same subject, will take as an illustration the death of an unemployed worker's family from starvation, the growing impoverishment etc and utilising this fact, known to all, will direct his efforts to presenting a single idea to the "masses". Consequently the propagandist operates chiefly by means of the printed word; the agitator by means of the spoken word.

On this last point Lenin was wrong, because he was too one-sided. As he himself had argued, before and after he wrote the statement above, the revolutionary paper can and must be a most effective agitator. But this is a secondary matter. The important thing is that agitation, spoken or written, does not try to explain everything. So we say, and must say, that those individual miners who resort to the capitalist courts against the NUM are scabs, villains, in terms of the struggles today; quite apart from the general argument about the nature of the capitalist state.¹ Of course we make the argument but we seek to "excite", "stir up", "rouse discontent and indignation" against the courts among as many working people as possible. This includes those (a big majority) who do not yet accept that the state, any state and its courts, is necessarily an instrument of class rule.

Or take another example. Lenin speaks of "crying injustice". Yet as a profound student of Marx he knew very well that there is no "justice" or "injustice" independent of class interest. He is pointing to, and appealing to, here, the contradiction between the notions of "justice" or "fairness" which are promoted by the ideologists of capitalist society and the realities exposed in the course of the class struggle. And that is absolutely right from an agitational point of view.

The propagandist, of course, must probe deeper, must examine the notion of justice, its development and transformation through different class societies, its inevitable class content. But that is not the main thrust of agitation. Those "Marxists" who do not understand this are themselves victims of bourgeois ideology, of

1: The reference is to court cases by individual miners against their union, the National Union of Mineworkers during the 1984-5 strike—*editors' note*.

timeless generalisations which reflect an idealised class society. Most important, they do not grasp concretely the way in which working class attitudes actually change. They do not understand the role of experience, for example the experience of the role of the police in the miners' strike. They do not understand the difference between agitation and propaganda.

Both are necessary, indispensable, but both are not always possible. Agitation requires bigger forces. Of course an individual can sometimes agitate effectively against a particular grievance, say, lack of soap, or decent toilet paper in a particular workplace, but a widespread agitation with a general focus is not possible without a significant number of people who are suitably placed to carry it, without a party.

So what is the importance of the distinction today? For the most part socialists in Britain are not talking to thousands or tens of thousands. We are talking to small numbers of people, usually trying to win them through general socialist politics, rather than on the basis of mass agitation. So what we are arguing is basically propaganda. But it is here that the confusion arises. Because there is more than one sort of propaganda. There is a distinction between abstract propaganda, and that propaganda which can hopefully lead to activity, concrete or realistic propaganda.

Abstract propaganda raises ideas which are formally correct, but which do not relate to struggle or to the level of consciousness which exists among those to whom the ideas are being put. For example to argue that under socialism the wages system will be abolished is absolutely correct, but to place such a demand before workers today is not agitation, but propaganda of the most abstract form. Similarly constant demands for a general strike regardless of whether the prospect is a real one in the present situation leads not to agitation but to abstaining from the real struggle in the here and now.

Realistic propaganda on the other hand starts from the assumption that tiny groups of socialists cannot decisively influence large groups of workers at present in most circumstances. But it also assumes that there are arguments over specifics around which socialists can attempt to build. So the realistic propagandist in a

factory will not argue for abolition of the wages system. He or she will argue for a set of demands which hopefully can lead the struggle to victory, and certainly beyond the tokens of the trade union bureaucracy. So they will argue, for example, for a flat rate increase, the full claim, all out rather than selective strike, etc.

Getting the balance right

None of this is agitation in the sense that Lenin talked about it; it is one or two socialists raising a set of ideas about how to win. But neither is it abstract propaganda because it relates to a real struggle and so can relate to a sizeable minority of the workforce. This means that realistic propaganda can strike a chord with a much larger group of people than those who are fully open to socialist ideas. That at present very small group of people will be open to all the ideas of socialism. The larger group will not be but may still accept much of the propaganda of socialists about not trusting the officials, organising among the rank and file and so on.

The importance of the distinction is twofold. Those socialists who believe that they make propaganda in their small discussion groups, and agitate in their workplace, are very likely to overestimate their influence among the mass of workers and therefore miss the opportunity to build a base among a tiny number of supporters. Those who believe they just raise abstract propaganda in their discussions with other socialists and in their workplace are likely to adopt an abstentionist attitude when real struggles do break out.

By raising realistic propaganda in a period when mass agitation is not generally possible socialists are much more likely to be able to avoid both traps.

WHEN UNITY IS STRENGTH

SABBY SAGALL

From *Socialist Review* 241 (2000)

HOW DOES a minority of revolutionary socialists win over large sections, and eventually a majority, of working people to the need for revolution? This is the big question which has faced socialists historically, and which is once again raised by the deep crisis of capitalism and the growing radicalism of large numbers of workers. The revolutionary tradition which grew up around the Russian Revolution of 1917 used the central tactic of the united front to bridge that gap.

The united front is a means of getting revolutionary ideas across to much larger sections of workers with the eventual aim of persuading them to break with reformist ideas and organisations. Revolutionaries strive to achieve this partly through their ideas, but also, crucially, through uniting with other workers in day to day struggles on specific issues.

Lenin first developed the tactic during the Russian Revolution when the right wing General Kornilov attempted to overthrow the tottering government of Kerensky in August 1917. Although the Bolsheviks were being persecuted by Kerensky, Lenin didn't hesitate to call for an alliance between themselves and their oppressor. The Bolsheviks didn't hide their political differences with Kerensky—they advanced political demands as a precondition of their support. This united front led to the collapse of Kornilov's coup, as a direct result of which the Bolsheviks were able to win a majority in the soviets throughout Russia. But by the early 1920s international capitalism had weathered the revolutionary storm that swept across

Europe. In a series of deepening economic crises during the next two decades the ruling classes not only repulsed the workers' offensives, but launched offensives of their own.

How could these attacks be resisted? The European Communist parties were mass organisations, but nevertheless minorities. Millions of workers continued to support the old reformist Labour parties or the newer "centrist" organisations which vacillated between reform and revolution. The revolutionaries believed that the majority would only break with reformism if they discovered through their own experience that the existing organisations were unable to repel the employers' offensive and defend the gains achieved by workers. The key question was what joint action would most clearly express the unity the most conscious workers wanted.

The united front meant building a campaign over a specific issue, for example, wage cuts or rising unemployment, putting forward demands, usually defensive, that workers from different parties, and also non-aligned workers, could unite around in practice. The test of practice would convince reformist workers that the ideas and arguments were correct, and that the official leaders were not serious about fighting for those demands.

Because of this, both Lenin and Trotsky insisted on the strict need for revolutionaries to maintain their political identity within the united front. They had to retain their freedom to criticise their alliance partners, continuing to produce their own publications and acting independently if necessary. As Trotsky put it, "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."

The united front also had to be organised around specific limited issues. It was not about submerging real and important political differences, for example, about the nature of parliament. It was about uniting in action.

According to Trotsky, it followed from the limited nature of a united front that revolutionaries should not demand in advance agreement on the whole revolutionary programme from non-revolutionary workers who only wanted a broad fight on specific questions. Revolutionaries could only win reformist workers

to their ideas by involving them in common action. Hence they should only suggest action on agreed issues.

Trotsky emphasised the need for a united front to be between organisations of comparable size. The different partners must deliver something, however small, to the joint campaign, which means they must represent genuine forces, not statistics on paper. So, when the Labour Party was in opposition,¹ it would have been a meaningless gesture for the SWP to call for a united front with the party as a whole. The disparity in size and influence would have made it appear less a genuine strategy than a self-publicising manoeuvre. On the other hand, a proposal for unity with the Labour left or its former adherents, say over the fight against fascism, did make sense, as happened with the Anti Nazi League. This was also true with the anti poll tax campaign. And such a call continues to make sense in the growing mood against big business and the policies of New Labour.

A united front cannot simply be based on a formal agreement between the leaderships of different organisations. It has to focus on the rank and file, involving workers in individual workplaces or at the grassroots who feel the need to unite against privatisation, racism or the underfunding of health, education and housing. Trotsky said that the highest expression of the united front was the soviets—the workers' councils created during the Russian Revolution. In today's situation, with the decline of the old Communist parties and New Labour's sharp lurch to the right, this involves appealing to the rank and file of the Labour left and of the unions.

At the same time the leaders of the reformist organisations cannot be ignored. A united struggle involves trying to negotiate with them so as to build a common platform and joint action.

How did the theory of the united front work out in practice during the turbulent years of economic crisis ushered in by the Great Crash in 1929? Workers everywhere were fighting defensive battles against unemployment, wage and welfare cuts, and the growing threat of fascism. The German Social Democrats, the SPD, dithered,

1: This article appeared under a Labour government, which had taken office in 1997—*editor's note*.

tolerating the semi-dictatorial Brüning regime as the “lesser evil” compared to the fascists and waiting for the crisis to pass. Trotsky urged the leaders of the German Communist Party (CP) to seize the golden opportunity that existed to call on the SPD leadership to join them in a united front to defeat Nazism.

Together the two parties counted for 40 percent of the vote, a majority of the working class who, if united, had the power to repel the forces of fascism. Tragically the CP, at Stalin’s behest, adopted a sectarian, ultra-left line, labelling the SPD “social fascists”. According to Stalin, “social democracy, objectively speaking”, was “the moderate wing of fascism”. Already in 1930 the CP had dismissed the SPD government of Müller as “fascist”. But if “fascism” already existed, why the urgent need to combat the Nazis who only represented “a different form of fascism”? German workers were regarded as having reached a revolutionary level sufficient to make a united front superfluous.

Hence the CP leaders adopted the very “ultimatist” approach to the SPD workers that Trotsky warned against, refusing to call on them to join a united front, instead demanding they fall in immediately behind the CP. The result of this was that the German labour movement remained divided, enabling Hitler to take power without even a fight.

In the Spanish Civil War of 1936-9, Stalin zigzagged from ultra-left sectarianism in Germany to the opportunism of the Popular Front. Here, instead of calling on the other working class and poor peasant parties to join them in a united front against Franco, the Spanish CP entered a coalition that stretched from the left to the liberal bourgeois parties. The CP made a fatal error in assuming that the bourgeois members of the Popular Front government had an interest in seriously prosecuting the anti-fascist struggle. But prior to the civil war the liberal bourgeoisie had consistently upheld landed property, the church and the army, so it was not likely that they would wholeheartedly attack these institutions in the battle against Franco. But the Republicans had no chance of winning the mass of poor peasants to the anti-fascist cause unless they attacked the property rights of the large rural landowners. They were precluded from this

strategy because the big bourgeoisie, which retained strong links with the landed interests, was included in the anti-fascist coalition.

In France in the early 1930s the fascists were growing but the Communist and Socialist parties refused to unite to fight them. By 1934 the fascist movement claimed one million members and had the confidence to attack the French parliament in an attempt to topple the liberal Radical government. Rank and file members of the CP and the Socialist Party, and also of the CGT, the main trade union federation, spontaneously linked up during a mammoth demonstration that started out as two separate marches. Two years later, in May 1936, a Popular Front government was elected, triggering the most massive strike wave in working class history. Workers right across the country occupied factories. The union leaders quickly reached an agreement conceding higher wages, shorter hours and paid holidays. The strikes were called off despite opposition from below.

With fascism the Popular Front called merely for the banning of fascist organisations by the state. Even some Radicals, members of a pro-imperialist party, judged its programme to be too weak. It was an agreement between leaders who stood above the masses, who agreed to abstain from mutual criticism. In no way, therefore, was it a campaign that could unite workers, whether revolutionary or reformist, in united action.

The lessons that can be learned from the historical experience of the Popular Front are currently particularly relevant to the situation of socialists in Austria fighting the neo-Nazi Freedom Party of Haider. The tactic of the united front will be of increasing importance in coming years. As workers feel the need to fight back under the blows of the crisis, and as the Social Democratic and Labour parties fail to deliver for their supporters, the need to unite to defend workers' rights will be at the centre of socialist politics.

TROTSKY AND THE COMINTERN

DUNCAN HALLAS

Edited extracts from *Trotsky's Marxism* (1979)

THE IDEAL of an international workers' movement is as old as, if not indeed older than, the *Communist Manifesto* itself, with its call, "Workers of the world unite." In 1864 (the First International) and again in 1889 (the Second International) attempts had been made to give it an organisational expression. The Second International had collapsed in 1914 when its big parties in the warring states broke with internationalism and supported the governments of the German and Austrian kaisers, the English king and the French bourgeois Third Republic.

The capitulations of 1914 led Lenin to declare, "The Second International is dead... Long live the Third International." Five years later, in 1919, the Third International was actually founded. Trotsky played a major role in it in the early years.

Later, with the rise of Stalinism in the USSR, the International was prostituted in the service of the Stalinist state in Russia. Trotsky more than anyone else fought against this degeneration. Many of his most valuable writings on the strategy and tactics of revolutionary workers' parties relate to the Third International, the Comintern, both in the period of its rise and in the period of its subsequent decline.

Time and again, in his writings in the late 1920s and the 1930s, Trotsky was to refer to the decisions of the first four congresses of the Comintern as the model of revolutionary policy. What were these decisions and in what circumstances were they adopted?

It was 4 March 1919. Thirty-five delegates meeting in the Kremlin voted, with one abstention, to constitute the Third or Communist

International. It was not a very weighty or representative gathering. Only the five delegates from the Russian Communist Party represented a party which was both a mass organisation and a genuinely revolutionary one. Stange of the Norwegian Labour Party (NAP) came from a mass party but, as events were to prove, the NAP was far from revolutionary in practice. Eberlein of the newly-formed Communist Party of Germany (KPD) represented a real revolutionary organisation but one that was still only a few thousand strong. Most of the other delegates represented very little.

The majority took it for granted that an “International” without some real mass support in a number of countries was nonsense. Zinoviev, for the Russians, argued that mass support existed in fact. That the socialist revolution was an immediate prospect in central Europe, above all in Germany, was not doubted by any of the delegates. Lenin, the most sober and calculating of revolutionaries, had said in his opening speech that “not only in Russia, but in the most developed capitalist countries of Europe, Germany for example, civil war is a fact...the world revolution is beginning and growing in intensity everywhere.”

This was not fantasy. In November 1918 the German Empire, till then the most powerful state in Europe, had collapsed. Workers’ and soldiers’ councils had covered the country and wielded effective power. True, the social democratic leaders, who dominated them, bent all their efforts towards reconstituting the old capitalist state power under a new “republican” guise. That was all the more reason for creating a revolutionary International with a strong centralised leadership to guide and support the struggle for a Soviet Germany.

And that struggle, in spite of the bloody suppression of the Spartakus rising in January 1919, appeared to be developing. A month after the Moscow meeting the Bavarian Soviet Republic was proclaimed. The other great central European power, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, had ceased to exist. The successor states were in varying degrees of revolutionary ferment. In German-speaking Austria the only effective armed force was the social democratic controlled *Volkswehr* (People’s Army). In Hungary, the Soviet Republic was proclaimed on 21 March 1919. All the new or reconstituted

states—Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, even Poland—were highly unstable.

The role of the socialist leaderships was crucial. The majority now supported counter-revolution in the name of “democracy”. In 1914 they had capitulated to “their own” ruling classes. They were now, in this critical time, the major prop of capitalism, using socialist phrases and the credit established by their years of opposition to the old regimes before 1914 to prevent the establishment of workers’ power.

What was the Comintern’s essential political basis? It rested on two fundamental planks: revolutionary internationalism and the soviet system as the means whereby the workers would rule society. The main resolution of the 1919 Congress declared:

Democracy assumed different forms and was applied in different degrees in the ancient republics of Greece, the medieval cities and the advanced capitalist countries. It would be sheer nonsense to think that the most profound revolution in history, the first case in the world of power being transferred from the exploiting minority to the exploited majority, could take place within the timeworn framework of the old, bourgeois parliamentary democracy, without drastic changes, without the creation of new forms of democracy, new institutions that embody the new conditions for applying democracy.

Soviets or parliament? After the October Revolution the Russian Communist Party had dispersed the newly elected Constituent Assembly, in which the Social-Revolutionary peasant party had a majority, in favour of soviet power. After the November Revolution the German Social Democratic Party had dissolved the workers’ and soldiers’ councils, in which it had a majority, in favour of the National Assembly, in which it did not.

In both cases the question of constitutional forms was really a question of class power. The effect of the Russian Communist Party’s action was to create a workers’ state; The effect of the SPD’s action was to create a bourgeois state, the Weimar Republic.

Centrism and ultra-leftism

Parties and groups only recently affiliated to the Second International are more and more frequently applying for membership in the Third International, though they have not become really communist... The Communist International is, to a certain extent, becoming fashionable... In certain circumstances, the Communist International may be faced with the danger of dilution by the influx of wavering and irresolute groups that have not yet broken with their Second International ideology.

So wrote Lenin in July 1920. The assumption of the 1919 Congress of the Comintern, that a truly mass revolutionary movement existed in Europe, was shown to be correct in the coming year.

In September 1919 the Bologna congress of the Italian Socialist Party voted by a large majority and on the recommendation of its executive to affiliate to the Communist International. The Norwegian Labour Party, the NAP, confirmed its affiliation and the Bulgarian, Yugoslav (ex-Serbian) and Romanian parties joined as well. The first three of these were important organisations. The NAP which, like its British counterpart, was based on trade union affiliation, completely dominated the Norwegian left, and the Bulgarian CP had the support from the beginning of virtually the whole Bulgarian working class. The Yugoslavian CP returned 54 deputies in the first (and only) free elections held in the new state.

In France, the Socialist Party, SFIO, which had more than doubled its membership—from 90,000 to 200,000 between 1918 and 1920—had swung far to the left, and was flirting with Moscow. So were the leaders of the German Independent Social Democrats, the USPD, an organisation which was rapidly gaining ground at the expense of the Social Democratic Party, the SPD. The Swedish left Social Democrats, the Czechoslovak left wing and smaller parties in other countries (including the British ILP) had essentially the same line. Pressure from their ranks was forcing them to pay lip service to the October Revolution and to negotiate for admission to the Communist International.

But these parties were not revolutionary communist organisations. Their traditions were those of pre-war social democracy—revolutionary in words, passive in practice. And they were led by men who would try any twist or turn in order to keep control and prevent the adoption of genuine revolutionary strategy and tactics.

Without the bulk of the members of these parties the new International could not hope to exert a decisive influence in Europe in the short term. Without a break with the centrist leaders it could not hope to exert a revolutionary influence. Nor was the situation much different with the mass parties already inside the International. The Italian Socialist Party, for example, had centrists and even some thoroughgoing reformists in its leadership.

The struggle against centrism was complicated by another factor. Strong ultra-leftist currents existed inside many of the communist organisations. And outside them were some important syndicalist trade union organisations which had moved close to the Third International but which still rejected the need for a communist party. To gain and integrate these big forces was a difficult and complex operation. It required a struggle on several different fronts.

The decisions of the Second Congress were of fundamental importance. In a sense this was the real founding congress. It took place during the height of the war with Poland, when the Red Army was nearing Warsaw. In Germany an attempt to establish a military dictatorship, the Kapp putsch, had just been defeated by mass working class action. In Italy the factory occupations were about to begin. The mood of revolutionary optimism was stronger than ever. All that was needed were real mass communist parties to lead the movement to victory. One of Trotsky's major interventions in the congress was concerned with the nature of such parties.

Trotsky argued that the revolutionary syndicalists were much closer to constituting a communist party than the centrists who took the idea of a party for granted.¹ The syndicalist position was not

1: Syndicalism was based on the notion that revolutionary trade unions could overthrow capitalism without the need for a party to wage a political struggle—*editor's note*.

entirely adequate—something had to be added: “an inventory... which concentrates the entire experience accumulated by the working class. That is how we conceive our party. That is how we conceive our International.”

It could not be primarily a propaganda organisation. Speaking at the Comintern Executive (ECCI) against the Dutch ultra-left Gorter who had accused the Comintern of “chasing after the masses”, Trotsky declared:

What does Comrade Gorter propose? What does he want? Propaganda! This is the gist of his entire method. Revolution, says Comrade Gorter, is contingent neither upon privations nor economic conditions but on mass consciousness; while mass consciousness is, in turn, shaped by propaganda. Propaganda is here taken in a purely idealistic manner... What you now want to do amounts essentially to replacing the dynamic development of the International by methods of individual recruitment of workers through propaganda.

The passive, propagandist type of ultra-leftism was not the only variety represented in the early Comintern. In 1921, a putschist tendency developed in the leadership of the German party. In March of that year, in the absence of a revolutionary situation nationally (locally, in parts of central Germany, something like a revolutionary situation existed), the party leadership tried to force the pace, to substitute the party militants for a true mass movement. The result of this “March Action” was a serious defeat—party membership dropped from about 350,000 to around 150,000. A “theory of the offensive” was used to justify the KPD tactics:

There was advanced the so-called theory of the offensive. What is the gist of this theory? Its gist is that we have entered the epoch of the decomposition of capitalist society, in other words, the epoch when the bourgeoisie must be overthrown. How? By the offensive of the working class. In this purely abstract form it is unquestionably correct. But certain individuals have sought

to convert this theoretical capital into corresponding currency of smaller denominations and they have declared that this offensive consists of a successive number of smaller offensives.

So noted Trotsky in a speech in the summer of 1921. He went on:

Comrades, the analogy between the political struggle of the working class and military operations has been much abused. But up to a certain point one can speak here of similarities... What happens after a partial defeat? There sets in a certain dislocation of the military apparatus, there arises a certain need for a breathing spell, a need for reorientation and a more precise estimation of the reciprocal forces... Sometimes all this becomes possible only under the conditions of strategic retreat...

But to understand this properly, to discern in a move backwards, in a retreat, a component part of a unified strategic plan—for that a certain experience is necessary. But if one reasons purely abstractly and insists on always moving forward... on the assumption that everything can be superseded by an added extension of revolutionary will, what results does one then get? We are told that the situation...can be remedied only by a new offensive... Under these conditions we would suffer an even greater and much more dangerous defeat. No comrades, after such a defeat we must retreat.

The united front

In fact, by the summer of 1921, the Comintern leadership had decided that a strategic retreat in a more general sense was necessary. According to the “Theses on the World Situation”, of which Trotsky was the author, adopted at the Third Comintern Congress in July 1921:

The first period of the post-war revolutionary movement, distinguished by the spontaneous character of its assaults, by the marked imprecision of its aims and methods, and by the

extreme panic which it aroused amongst the ruling classes, seems in essentials to be over. The self-confidence of the bourgeoisie as a class, and the outward stability of their state organs, have undeniably been strengthened... The leaders of the bourgeoisie are even boasting of the power of their state machines and have gone over to an offensive against the workers in all countries both on the economic and on the political front.

Soon after the congress, the ECCI began to press the parties to shift the emphasis of their work towards the united front. The essence of this approach was clearly summarised by Trotsky early in 1922:

The task of the Communist Party is to lead the proletarian revolution... To achieve it the Communist Party must base itself on the overwhelming majority of the working class... The party can achieve this only by remaining an absolutely independent organisation... That is why the party was bound to break ideologically with the reformists and centrists... After assuring itself of the complete independence and ideological homogeneity of its ranks, the Communist Party fights for influence over the majority of the working class... But it is perfectly self-evident that the class life of the proletariat is not suspended during this period preparatory 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—inssofar as they involve the vital interests of the entire working class, or its majority, or this or that section—the working masses sense the need of unity in action, of unity in resisting the onslaught of capitalism or unity in taking the offensive against it. 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 the workers.

Consequently the question of the united front is not at all...a question of the reciprocal relations between the Communist parliamentary fraction and that of the Socialists, or between

the central committees of the two parties... The problem of the united front...grows out of the urgent need to secure for the working class the possibility of a united front in the struggle against capitalism... Unity of front consequently presupposes our readiness, within certain limits and on specific issues, 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.

But, after all, didn't we split with them? Yes, because we disagree with them on fundamental questions of the working class movement. And yet we seek agreement with them? Yes, in all those cases where the masses that follow them are ready to engage in joint struggle together with the masses that follow us and when they, the reformists, are to a lesser or greater degree compelled to become an instrument of this struggle...

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

The Fourth Comintern Congress (1922), which was largely concerned with the united front, was the last Lenin attended and the last which Trotsky regarded as essentially correct in its decisions.

The year 1923 saw the emergence of the triumvirate of Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev on the one hand and of the Left Opposition on the other. In Europe it saw two crippling defeats for the Comintern. In June, the Bulgarian Communist Party, a mass party enjoying the support of virtually the entire working class, adopted a position of "neutrality", or rather complete passivity, in the face

of the right-wing coup against the Peasant Party government. Then, after the bourgeois democratic regime had been destroyed, a military dictatorship established and the mass of the population cowed, it launched a sudden insurrection, without any serious political preparation. It was smashed and a ferocious White Terror ensued. In Germany, a profound economic, social and political crisis occurred. A rising was planned for October, after the Communist Party had formed a coalition government with Social Democrats in Saxony, but cancelled at the last minute. (In Hamburg the cancellation was not received in time; an isolated insurrection occurred and was crushed after two days.)

Trotsky believed that a historic opportunity had been missed. From this time on the policy of the Comintern became increasingly determined, first by the requirements of Stalin's faction in the inner party struggle in the USSR and later by the foreign policy requirements of Stalin's government. After a brief "left" oscillation in 1924, the Comintern was pushed in a rightist direction until 1928, then into ultra-leftism (1928-34) and finally far to the right in the Popular Front period (1935-9). It is convenient to present Trotsky's critique using three examples.

The Anglo-Soviet Trade Union Committee

The policy (under Comintern direction) of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) up to and during the General Strike of 1926 was one of the most important indictments Trotsky made of the Comintern in its first rightist phase. The General Strike of May 1926 was a decisive turning point in British history—and it was an unmitigated defeat for the working class. It brought to an end a long, though not uninterrupted, period of working class militancy, it led to the prolonged dominance of the unions by their openly class-collaborationist right wing and it led to the massive reinforcement of Labour Party reformism at the expense of the Communist Party.

In 1924-5 the tide in the trade union movement was flowing leftwards. The CPGB-inspired Minority Movement, founded in 1924 around the slogans "Stop the Retreat" and "Back to the Unions", was gaining considerable influence. At the same time the official

movement was coming under the influence of a group of leftist officials. And, from the spring of 1925, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) collaborated with the Soviet Trade Union Federation through the “Anglo-Soviet Joint Trade Union Advisory Committee”, a fact that gave the General Councillors a certain “revolutionary” aura and a cover against critics on the left.

The essence of Trotsky’s criticism was that the CPGB, on Moscow’s urging, was building up trust in these left bureaucrats (the central CPGB slogan was “All Power to the General Council”!) who were certain to betray the movement at a critical stage, rather than struggle to build independently among the rank and file, using whatever cover the “lefts” afforded but in no way relying on them or encouraging militants to rely on them; on the contrary, counting on their treachery, warning against it and preparing for it.

He did not argue that the policy of independent communist work would necessarily have won the strike:

No revolutionist who weighs his words would contend that a victory would have been guaranteed by proceeding along this line. But a victory was possible only along this road. A defeat on this road was a defeat on a road that could lead later to victory.

However, this road:

appeared too long and uncertain to the bureaucrats of the Communist International. They considered that by means of personal influence on [union leaders] Purcell, Hicks, Cook and the others...they would gradually and imperceptibly draw [them] into the Communist International... The masses knew as the leaders of this movement only Purcell, Hicks and Cook, whom, moreover, Moscow vouched for. These “left” friends, in a serious test, shamefully betrayed the proletariat. The revolutionary workers were thrown into confusion, sank into apathy and naturally extended their disappointment to the Communist Party itself which had only been the passive part of this whole mechanism of betrayal and perfidy.

Germany in the Third Period

The Sixth World Congress of the Comintern (summer 1928) began a process of violent reaction against the rightist line of 1924-8. An ultra-leftist line of a peculiarly bureaucratic character was imposed on Communist parties everywhere, regardless of local circumstances. A reflection of the launching of the first five-year plan and the forced collectivisation in the USSR, this new line proclaimed a “Third Period”, a period of “ascending revolutionary struggles”. In practice this meant that at a time when fascism was a real and growing danger, especially in Germany, the social democrats were regarded as the main enemy.

“In this situation of growing imperialist contradictions and sharpening of the class struggle”, declared the Tenth Plenum of the ECCI in 1929:

fascism becomes more and more the dominant method of bourgeois rule. In countries where there are strong social democratic parties, fascism assumes the particular form of social fascism, which to an ever increasing extent serves the bourgeoisie as an instrument for paralysing the activity of the masses in the struggle against the regime of fascist dictatorship.

It followed that the united front policy, as understood until then, had to be jettisoned. There could be no question of trying to force the mass social democratic parties and the unions they controlled into a united front against the fascists. They were themselves social-fascists. Trotsky wrote and argued against this criminal stupidity with increasing urgency and desperation from 1929 until the catastrophe of 1933.

The central theme of all these writings was the necessity “for a workers’ united front against fascism”. But there was much more than this. Trotsky forced himself to follow the tortuous arguments that Stalin’s German acolytes advanced in defence of the indefensible. Thus, his writings of this period take up and refute an extraordinary range of pseudo-Marxist argument and, at the same time, expound with exceptional clarity the “highest expression of proletarian strategy”. Only a small part of them can be referred to here:

The official press of the Comintern is now depicting the results of the German elections [of September 1930] as a prodigious victory of Communism, which places the slogan of a Soviet Germany on the order of the day. The bureaucratic optimists do not want to reflect on the meaning of the relationship of forces which is disclosed by the election statistics. They examine the figure of Communist votes gained independently of the revolutionary tasks created by the situation and the obstacles it sets up.

The Communist Party received around 4,600,000 votes as against 3,300,000 in 1928. From the standpoint of "normal" parliamentary machines, the gain of 1,300,000 votes is considerable... But the gain of the party pales completely beside the leap of fascism from 800,000 to 6,400,000 votes. Of no less significance is the fact that the social democracy, in spite of substantial losses, retained its basic cadres and still received a considerably greater number of workers' votes than the Communist Party.

Meanwhile, if we should ask ourselves what combination of international and domestic circumstances could be capable of turning the working class towards Communism with greater velocity, we could not find an example of more favourable circumstances for such a turn than the situation in present day Germany...the economic crisis, the disintegration of the rulers, the crisis of parliamentarianism, the terrific self-exposure of the social democracy in power. From the viewpoint of these concrete historical circumstances, the specific gravity of the German Communist Party in the social life of the country, in spite of the gain of 1,300,000 votes, remains proportionately small...

For the social crisis to bring about the proletarian revolution, it is necessary that, besides other conditions, a decisive shift of the petty-bourgeois classes occurs in the direction of the proletariat. This will give the proletariat a chance to put itself at the head of the nation as its leader. The last election revealed...a shift in the opposite direction. Under the impact of the crisis,

the petty-bourgeoisie swung, not in the direction of the proletarian revolution, but in the direction of the most extreme imperialist reaction, pulling behind it considerable sections of the proletariat.

The gigantic growth of National Socialism is an expression of two factors: a deep social crisis throwing the petty-bourgeois masses off balance, and the lack of a revolutionary party that would today be regarded by the popular masses as the acknowledged revolutionary leader. If the Communist Party is the party of revolutionary hope, then fascism, as a mass movement, is the party of counter-revolutionary despair. When revolutionary hope embraces the whole proletarian mass, it inevitably pulls behind it on the road of revolution considerable and growing sections of the petty-bourgeoisie. Precisely in this sphere, the election revealed the opposite picture: counter-revolutionary despair embraced the petty-bourgeois mass with such force that it drew behind it many sections of the proletariat...

Fascism in Germany has become a real danger, as an acute expression of the helpless position of the bourgeois regime, the conservative role of the social democracy in the regime, and the accumulated powerlessness of the Communist Party to abolish it.

To mend the situation, Trotsky argued, it was necessary first of all to shake the Communist Party out of its sterile ultra-radicalism. The policy of “bureaucratic ultimatism” must be replaced by one of active manoeuvre grounded in the united front policy:

It is a difficult task to arouse all at once the majority of the German working class for an offensive. As a consequence of the defeats of 1919, 1921 and 1923 and of the adventures of the “third period” the German workers, who on top of that are bound by powerful conservative organisations, have developed strong centres of inhibition. But, on the other hand, the organisational solidarity of the German workers, which has almost

altogether prevented until now the penetration of fascism into their ranks, opens the very greatest possibilities of defensive struggles. One must bear in mind that the policy of the united front is in general much more effective for the defensive than for the offensive. The more conservative or backward strata are more easily drawn into a struggle to fight for what they have than for new conquests.

All manner of sophistries were employed by the Stalinists to obscure the issue and to represent what had once been Comintern policy as “counter-revolutionary Trotskyism”. The united front, it was argued, could come “only from below”, that is, agreements with the social democrats were excluded but individual social democrats could take part in a “Red United Front”—provided they accepted the leadership of the Communist Party!

And increasingly the fatal illusion—summed up as “After Hitler, our turn”—was encouraged, a perspective of passivity and impotence masked by radical rhetoric, as Trotsky repeatedly stressed.

The Communist Party held fast to its fatal course. Hitler came to power. The workers’ movement was smashed.

The Popular Front and the Spanish Revolution

Hitler’s victory drove the rulers of the USSR to seek “insurance” by means of a military alliance with the then still dominant Western powers of France and Britain. As an auxiliary to Stalin’s diplomacy—for that is what it had now become—the Comintern was jerked hard to the right. The Seventh (and last) Congress was convened in 1935 as a public demonstration that revolution was definitely off the agenda. It called for “The United People’s Front in the struggle for peace and against the instigations of war. All those interested in the preservation of peace should be drawn into this united front.”

Those interested in the preservation of peace included the victors of 1918, the French and British ruling classes, the objects of the new line. “Today the situation is not what it was in 1914,” declared the ECCI in May 1936:

Now it is not only the working class, the peasantry and all working people who are resolved to maintain peace, but also the oppressed countries and the weak nations whose independence is threatened by war... In the present phase a number of capitalist states are also concerned to maintain peace. Hence the possibility of creating a broad front of the working class, of all working people and of entire nations against the danger of imperialist war.

Such a “front” was, of course, necessarily a defence of the imperialist status quo. A reformist rhetoric had to be liberally employed to conceal this fact and was highly successful—for a time.

In the first phase popular enthusiasm for unity brought enormous gains to the Communist parties—the French party grew from 30,000 in 1934 to 150,000 by the end of 1936 plus 100,000 in the Communist Youth; the Spanish party grew from under a thousand at the close of the Third Period (1934) to 35,000 in February 1936 to 117,000 in July 1937. The recruits were armoured against criticism from the left by the belief that the Trotskyists were literally fascist agents.

In May 1935 the Franco-Soviet pact was signed. By July the CP and the French Socialist Party (SFIO) had come to an agreement with the Radical Party, the backbone of French bourgeois democracy, and in April 1936 the Front Populaire of these three parties won a general election on a platform of collective security and reform. The CP gained 72 seats campaigning on the slogan “For a strong, free and happy France” and became an essential part of the parliamentary majority of Leon Blum, the SFIO leader and Front Populaire Prime Minister. Maurice Thorez, the secretary general of the PCF, was able to claim, “We boldly deprived our enemies of the things they had stolen from us and trampled underfoot. We took back the Marseillaise and the Tricolour.”

When the electoral victory of the left was followed by a massive wave of strikes and sit-ins—six million workers were involved in June 1936—the erstwhile champions of “ascending revolutionary struggles” exerted themselves to contain the movement within narrow limits and to end it on the basis of the “Matignon

Agreement” concessions (notably the 40-hour week and holidays with pay). By the end of the year the Communist Party, now to the right of its social democratic allies, was calling for the extension of the “Popular Front” into a “French Front” by the incorporation of some right-wing conservatives who were, on nationalist grounds, strongly anti-German.

The French party pioneered these policies because the French alliance was central to Stalin’s foreign policy but they were rapidly adopted by the whole Comintern. When the Spanish Revolution erupted in July 1936, in response to Franco’s attempted seizure of power, the Spanish CP, part of the Spanish Popular Front which had won the February elections and taken power, did its utmost to keep the movement within the framework of “democracy”. With the aid of Russian diplomacy, and of course the social democrats, it was successful. “It is absolutely false”, declared Jesus Hernandez, editor of the party’s daily paper:

that the present workers’ movement has for its object the establishment of the proletarian dictatorship after the war has terminated... We Communists are the first to repudiate this supposition. We are motivated exclusively by a desire to defend the democratic republic.

In pursuit of this line the Spanish Communist Party and its bourgeois allies pushed the policies of the republican government more and more to the right; in the course of the long, drawn-out civil war, it drove out of the government first the Poum, a party to the left of the CP which Trotsky had bitterly criticised for entering the Popular Front in the first place and so disarming itself politically and providing a “left” cover for the Communist Party, and then the left-wing leaders of the Spanish Socialist Party.

“The defence of republican order while defending property” led to a reign of terror in Republican Spain against the left. And this paved the way, Trotsky demonstrated, for Franco’s victory.

“The Spanish proletariat displayed first-rate military qualities,” he wrote in December 1937:

In its specific gravity in the country's economic life, in its political and cultural level, the Spanish proletariat stood on the first day of the revolution not below but above the Russian proletariat at the beginning of 1917. On the road to its victory, its own organisations stood as the chief obstacles. The commanding clique of Stalinists, in accordance with their counter-revolutionary function, consisted of hirelings, careerists, de-classed elements, and in general, all types of social refuse. The representatives of other labour organisations—incurable reformists, Anarchist phrasemongers, helpless centrists of the Poum—grumbled, groaned, wavered, manoeuvred, but in the end adapted themselves to the Stalinists. As a result of their joint activity, the camp of social revolution—workers and peasants—proved to be subordinated to the bourgeoisie, or more correctly, to its shadow. It was bled white and its character was destroyed.

There was no lack of heroism on the part of the masses or courage on the part of individual revolutionists. But the masses were left to their own resources while the revolutionists remained disunited, without a programme, without a plan of action. The “republican” military commanders were more concerned with crushing the social revolution than with scoring military victories. The soldiers lost confidence in their commanders, the masses in the government; the peasants stepped aside; the workers became exhausted; defeat followed defeat; demoralisation grew apace. All this was not difficult to foresee from the beginning of the civil war. By setting itself the task of rescuing the capitalist regime, the Popular Front doomed itself to military defeat. By turning Bolshevism on its head, Stalin succeeded completely in fulfilling the role of gravedigger of the revolution.

Trotsky's writings on strategy and tactics in relation to these great questions are a veritable treasure house. It can be said without any exaggeration that no one else since 1923 has produced work that even approaches their profundity and brilliance. They are, literally, indispensable to revolutionaries today.

Sample questions for discussion

- › Under what circumstances might it be correct for the SWP to raise the slogan of a general strike? Would this be an example of propaganda or agitation?
- › How would you respond to the claim that the SWP only works in broader organisations in order to recruit people?
- › The SWP is well known for launching and participating in united fronts such as Unite Against Fascism and Stop the War Coalition. How do such organisations differ from the kinds of united front advocated by Trotsky? How should these differences affect our practice?
- › If the union leaders and Labour Party launched a broad coalition against the government's cuts, what position should revolutionaries take towards it?

Further reading

Tony Cliff's classic book *Lenin: Building the Party, 1893-1914* has been regularly reprinted and is currently available from Bookmarks. Duncan Hallas's *Trotsky's Marxism* can be read in full online on the Marxist Internet Archive (www.marxists.org). A second work by Hallas, *The Comintern*, which looks in detail at the history of the Third International, is available from the same source. Both have recently been reprinted by Haymarket books.

Also on the Marxist Internet Archive are many of the writings of Lenin and Trotsky. As Cliff points out, some of these, especially Lenin's works, are inseparable from the context in which they were written. However, a number of Trotsky's major works are written for a broader audience and are of more obvious general importance, including *The Lessons of October*, *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, *The History of the Russian Revolution* and the various articles on the rise of fascism in Germany written in 1930-3.