



Internationalist Group

League for the Fourth International

The Popular Front: Roadblock to Revolution



Central Press Photos

Volunteers from the anarcho-syndicalist CNT and POUM militias head to the front against Franco's forces in Spanish Civil War, Barcelona, September 1936. The bourgeois Popular Front government defended capitalist property, dissolved workers' militias and blocked the road to revolution.

Internationalist Group Class Readings

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Introduction

The question of the popular front is one of the defining issues in our epoch that sharply counterpose the revolutionary Marxism of Leon Trotsky to the opportunist maneuverings of the Stalinists and social democrats. Consequently, study of the popular front is indispensable for all those who seek to play a role in sweeping away capitalism – a system that has brought with it untold poverty, racial, ethnic, national and sexual oppression and endless war – and opening the road to a socialist future.

“In sum, the People’s Front is a bloc of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat,” Trotsky wrote in December 1937 in response to questions from the French magazine *Marianne*. Trotsky noted: “When two forces tend in opposite directions, the diagonal of the parallelogram approaches zero. This is exactly the graphic formula of a People’s Front government.”

As a *bloc*, a political coalition, the popular (or people’s) front is not merely a matter of *policy*, but of *organization*. Opportunists regularly pursue class-collaborationist policies, tailing after one or another bourgeois or petty-bourgeois force. But it is in moments of crisis or acute struggle that they find it necessary to organizationally chain the working class and other oppressed groups to the class enemy (or a sector of it).

The popular front, of course, claims to stand for all things “progressive”: “human rights,” “peace,” racial harmony, etc. The framework is usually presented as “democratic” and it is always bourgeois. But the popular front is more than just the usual hypocritical and empty phrases of capitalist politics: it is a guarantee by the misleaders of the workers movement to the rulers that in case of emergency, as the ranks radicalize, the workers organizations will stand in the way of revolutionary action, enforcing the discipline of their bourgeois “allies.”

As the class struggle sharpens and such coalitions are suddenly invented, the proletarian vanguard must fight to break with the popular front in order to unchain workers’ power and open the road to revolution. If they do not, the

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Leon Trotsky

The Transitional Program

(1938)

[Excerpts]

The Proletariat and its Leadership

In all countries the proletariat is racked by a deep disquiet. The multi-millioned masses again and again enter the road of revolution. But each time they are blocked by their own conservative bureaucratic machines.

The Spanish proletariat has made a series of heroic attempts since April 1931 to take power in its hands and guide the fate of society. However, its own parties (Social Democrats, Stalinists, Anarchists, POUMists)¹ – each in its own way acted as a brake and thus prepared Franco’s triumphs.

In France, the great wave of “sit down” strikes, particularly during June 1936, revealed the whole-hearted readiness of the proletariat to overthrow the capitalist system. However, the leading organizations (Socialists, Stalinists, Syndicalists) under the label of the Popular Front succeeded in canalizing and damming, at least temporarily, the revolutionary stream.

The unprecedented wave of sit down strikes and the amazingly rapid growth of industrial unionism in the United States (the CIO²) is the most indisputable

¹ The Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (Workers Party of Marxist Unification) was founded in Spain in 1935 when the supporters of the Trotskyist Left Opposition broke with Trotsky and merged with the centrist Catalan Bloc Obrer i Campesol (Workers and Peasants Bloc). Although POUM leaders claimed to support Trotsky and uphold permanent revolution, the next year they entered the People’s Front, leading Trotsky to denounce their betrayal of the fundamental Marxist principle of class independence from the bourgeoisie and cut off all ties to the new centrist party. Although the POUM tailed after and even participated in the popular-front government, rather than politically opposing it, as Trotsky did, while defending the bourgeois Republic against Franco and the fascists, the Stalinists still continued to brand the POUM “Trotskyite.” During the 1936-39 Spanish Civil War the Stalinists murdered many POUM members and leaders, including Andrés Nin.

² The Congress of Industrial Organizations was formed in 1935 by unions expelled from the American Federation of Labor for breaking with the AFL’s narrow craft unionism and instead organizing all workers in mass production in a single industrial union. Communists and other left-wingers

expression of the instinctive striving of the American workers to raise themselves to the level of the tasks imposed on them by history. But here, too, the leading political organizations, including the newly created CIO, do everything possible to keep in check and paralyze the revolutionary pressure of the masses.

The definite passing over of the Comintern to the side of bourgeois order, its cynically counterrevolutionary role throughout the world, particularly in Spain, France, the United States and other “democratic” countries, created exceptional supplementary difficulties for the world proletariat. Under the banner of the October Revolution, the conciliatory politics practiced by the “People’s Front” doom the working class to impotence and clear the road for fascism.

“People’s Fronts” on the one hand – fascism on the other: these are the last political resources of imperialism in the struggle against the proletarian revolution. From the historical point of view, however, both these resources are stopgaps. The decay of capitalism continues under the sign of the Phrygian cap in France as under the sign of the swastika in Germany. Nothing short of the overthrow of the bourgeoisie can open a road out....

Workers’ and Farmers’ Government

This formula, “workers’ and farmers’ government,” first appeared in the agitation of the Bolsheviks in 1917 and was definitely accepted after the October Revolution. In the final instance it represented nothing more than the popular designation for the already established dictatorship of the proletariat. The significance of this designation comes mainly from the fact that it underscored the idea of an *alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry* upon which the Soviet power rests.

When the Comintern of the epigones tried to revive the formula buried by history of the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry,” it gave to

played a prominent role in organizing the CIO and initiated many of its militant tactics, such as the sit-down strike (plant occupation). However, politically the CIO leadership supported Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt.

the formula of the “workers’ and peasants’ government” a completely different, purely “democratic,” i.e., bourgeois content, *counterposing* it to the dictatorship of the proletariat. The Bolshevik-Leninists resolutely rejected the slogan of the “workers’ and peasants’ government” in the bourgeois-democratic version. They affirmed then and affirm now that, when the party of the proletariat refuses to step beyond bourgeois democratic limits, its alliance with the peasantry is simply turned into a support for capital, as was the case with the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries in 1917, with the Chinese Communist Party in 1925-27, and as is now the case with the “People’s Front” in Spain, France and other countries.

From April to September 1917, the Bolsheviks demanded that the S.R.s and Mensheviks break with the liberal bourgeoisie and take power into their own hands. Under this provision the Bolshevik Party promised the Mensheviks and the S.R.s, as the petty bourgeois representatives of the worker and peasants, its revolutionary aid against the bourgeoisie categorically refusing, however, either to enter into the government of the Mensheviks and S.R.s or to carry political responsibility for it. If the Mensheviks and S.R.s had actually broken with the Cadets³ (liberals) and with foreign imperialism, then the “workers’ and peasants’ government” created by them could only have hastened and facilitated the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. But it was exactly because of this that the leadership of petty bourgeois democracy resisted with all possible strength the establishment of its own government. The experience of Russia demonstrated, and the experience of Spain and France once again confirms, that even under very favorable conditions the parties of petty bourgeois democracy (S.R.s, Social Democrats, Stalinists, Anarchists) are incapable of creating a government of workers and peasants, that is, a government independent of the bourgeoisie.

Nevertheless, the demand of the Bolsheviks, addressed to the Mensheviks and the S.R.s: “Break with the bourgeoisie, take the power into your own hands!” had for the masses tremendous educational significance. The obstinate unwillingness of the Mensheviks and S.R.s to take power, so dramatically exposed during the July Days, definitely doomed them before mass opinion and prepared the victory of the Bolsheviks.

The central task of the Fourth International consists in freeing the proletariat from the old leadership, whose conservatism is in complete contradiction to the catastrophic eruptions of disintegrating capitalism and

represents the chief obstacle to historical progress. The chief accusation which the Fourth International advances against the traditional organizations of the proletariat is the fact that they do not wish to tear themselves away from the political semi-corpse of the bourgeoisie. Under these conditions the demand, systematically addressed to the old leadership: “Break with the bourgeoisie, take the power!” is an extremely important weapon for exposing the treacherous character of the parties and organizations of the Second, Third and Amsterdam Internationals. The slogan, “workers’ and farmers’ government,” is thus acceptable to us only in the sense that it had in 1917 with the Bolsheviks, i.e., as an anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist slogan, but in no case in that “democratic” sense which later the epigones gave it, transforming it from a bridge to Socialist revolution into the chief barrier upon its path.

Of all parties and organizations which base themselves on the workers and peasants and speak in their name, we demand that they break politically from the bourgeoisie and enter upon the road of struggle for the workers’ and farmers’ government. On this road we promise them full support against capitalist reaction. At the same time, we indefatigably develop agitation around those transitional demands which should in our opinion form the program of the “workers’ and farmers’ government.”

Is the creation of such a government by the traditional workers’ organizations possible? Past experience shows, as has already been stated, that this is, to say the least, highly improbable. However, one cannot categorically deny in advance the theoretical possibility that, under the influence of completely exceptional circumstances (war, defeat, financial crash, mass revolutionary pressure, etc.), the petty bourgeois parties, including the Stalinists, may go further than they wish along the road to a break with the bourgeoisie. In any case one thing is not to be doubted: even if this highly improbable variant somewhere at some time becomes a reality and the “workers’ and farmers’ government” in the above-mentioned sense is established in fact, it would represent merely a short episode on the road to the actual dictatorship of the proletariat.

However, there is no need to indulge in guesswork. The agitation around the slogan of a workers’-farmers’ government preserves under all conditions a tremendous educational value. And not accidentally. This generalized slogan proceeds entirely along the line of the political development of our epoch (the bankruptcy and decomposition of the old bourgeois parties, the downfall of democracy, the growth of fascism, the accelerated drive of the workers toward more

³ Kadets, from the Russian initials (KD) of the Constitutional Democrats.

active and aggressive politics). Each of the transitional demands should, therefore, lead to one and the same political conclusion: the workers need to break with all traditional parties of the bourgeoisie in order, jointly with the farmers, to establish their own power.

It is impossible in advance to foresee what will be the concrete stages of the revolutionary mobilization of the masses. The sections of the Fourth International should critically orient themselves at each new stage and advance such slogans as will aid the striving of the workers for independent politics, deepen the class struggle of these politics, destroy reformist and pacifist illusions, strengthen the connection of the vanguard with the masses, and prepare the revolutionary conquest of power....

The Program of Transitional Demands in Fascist Countries

The émigré “People’s Front” is the most malignant and perfidious variety of all possible People’s Fronts. Essentially, it signifies the impotent longing for coalition with a nonexistent liberal bourgeoisie. Had it met with success, it would simply have prepared a series of new defeats of the Spanish type for the proletariat. A merciless exposure of the theory and practice of the “People’s Front” is therefore the first condition for a revolutionary struggle against fascism.

Of course, this does not mean that the Fourth International rejects democratic slogans as a means of mobilizing the masses against fascism. On the contrary, such slogans at certain moments can play a serious role. But the formulae of democracy (freedom of press, the right to unionize, etc.) mean for us only incidental or episodic slogans in the independent movement of the proletariat and not a democratic noose fastened to the neck of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie’s agents (Spain!)....

Under the Banner of the Fourth International!

Skeptics ask: But has the moment for the creation of the Fourth International yet arrived? It is impossible, they say, to create an International “artificially”; it can arise only out of great events, etc., etc. All of these objections merely show that skeptics are no good for the building of a new International. They are good for scarcely anything at all.

The Fourth International has already arisen out of great events: the greatest defeats of the proletariat in history. The cause for these defeats is to be found in the degeneration and perfidy of the old leadership. The class struggle does not tolerate an interruption. The Third In-



Leon Trotsky, in Coyoacán, Mexico (1940)

ternational, following the Second, is dead for purposes of revolution. Long live the Fourth International!

But has the time yet arrived to proclaim its creation? ... the skeptics are not quieted down. The Fourth International, we answer, has no need of being “proclaimed.” It exists and it fights. It is weak? Yes, its ranks are not numerous because it is still young. They are as yet chiefly cadres. But these cadres are pledges for the future. Outside these cadres there does not exist a single revolutionary current on this planet really meriting the name. If our international be still weak in numbers, it is strong in doctrine, program, tradition, in the incomparable tempering of its cadres. Who does not perceive this today, let him in the meantime stand aside. Tomorrow it will become more evident.

The Fourth International, already today, is deservedly hated by the Stalinists, Social Democrats, bourgeois liberals and fascists. There is not and there cannot be a place for it in any of the People’s Fronts. It uncompromisingly gives battle to all political groupings tied to the apron-strings of the bourgeoisie. Its task – the abolition of capitalism’s domination. Its aim – socialism. Its method – the proletarian revolution.

Leon Trotsky

The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning

(December 1937)

Menshevism and Bolshevism in Spain

All general staffs are studying closely the military operations in Ethiopia, in Spain, in the Far East, in preparation for the great future war. The battles of the Spanish proletariat, heat lightening flashes of the coming world revolution, should be no less attentively studied by the revolutionary staffs. Under this condition and this condition alone will the coming events not take us unawares.

Three ideologies fought – with unequal forces – in the so-called republican camp, namely, Menshevism, Bolshevism, and anarchism. As regards the bourgeois republican parties, they were without either independent ideas or independent political significance and were able to maintain themselves only by climbing on the backs of the reformists and Anarchists. Moreover, it is no exaggeration to say that the leaders of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism did everything to repudiate their doctrine and virtually reduce its significance to zero. Actually two doctrines in the so-called republican camp fought – Menshevism and Bolshevism.

According to the Socialists and Stalinists, i.e., the Mensheviks of the first and second instances, the Spanish revolution was called upon to solve only its “democratic” tasks, for which a united front with the “democratic” bourgeoisie was indispensable. From this point of view, any and all attempts of the proletariat to go beyond the limits of bourgeois democracy are not only premature but also fatal. Furthermore, on the agenda stands not the revolution but the struggle against insurgent Franco.

Fascism, however, is not feudal but bourgeois reaction. A successful fight against bourgeois reaction can be waged only with the forces and methods of the proletariat revolution. Menshevism, itself a branch of bourgeois thought, does not have and cannot have any inkling of these facts.

The Bolshevik point of view, clearly expressed only by the young section of the Fourth International, takes the theory of permanent revolution as its starting point, namely, that even purely democratic problems, like the liquidation of semi-feudal land ownership, cannot be solved without the conquest of power by the proletariat; but this in turn places the socialist revolution on the

agenda. Moreover, during the very first stages of the revolution, the Spanish workers themselves posed in practice not merely democratic problems but also purely socialist ones. The demand not to transgress the bounds of bourgeois democracy signifies in practice not a defense of the democratic revolution but a repudiation of it. Only through an overturn in agrarian relations could the peasantry, the great mass of the population, have been transformed into a powerful bulwark against fascism. But the landowners are intimately bound up with the commercial, industrial, and banking bourgeoisie, and the bourgeois intelligentsia that depends on them. The party of the proletariat was thus faced with a choice between going with the peasant masses or with the liberal bourgeoisie. There could be only one reason to include the peasantry and the liberal bourgeoisie in the same coalition at the same time: to help the bourgeoisie deceive the peasantry and thus isolate the workers. The agrarian revolution could have been accomplished only against the bourgeoisie, and therefore only through the masses of the dictatorship of the proletariat. There is no third, intermediate regime.

From the standpoint of theory, the most astonishing thing about Stalin’s Spanish policy is the utter disregard for the ABC of Leninism. After a delay of several decades – and what decades! – the Comintern has fully rehabilitated the doctrine of Menshevism. More than that, the Comintern has contrived to render this doctrine more “consistent” and by that token more absurd. In czarist Russia, on the threshold of 1905, the formula of “purely democratic revolution” had behind it, in any case, immeasurably more arguments than in 1937 in Spain. It is hardly astonishing that in modern Spain “the liberal labor policy” of Menshevism has been converted into the reactionary anti-labor policy of Stalinism. At the same time the doctrine of the Mensheviks, this caricature of Marxism, has been converted into a caricature of itself.

“Theory” of the Popular Front

It would be naive, however, to think that the politics of the Comintern in Spain stem from a theoretical “mistake.” Stalinism is not guided by Marxist theory, or for that matter any theory at all, but by the empirical interests of the Soviet bureaucracy. In their intimate

circles, the Soviet cynics mock Dimitrov's⁴ "philosophy" of the Popular Front. But they have at their disposal for deceiving the masses large cadres of propagators of this holy formula, sincere ones and cheats, simpletons and charlatans. Louis Fischer, with his ignorance and smugness, with his provincial rationalism and congenital deafness to revolution, is the most repulsive representative of this unattractive brotherhood. "The union of progressive forces!" "The Triumph of the idea of the Popular Front!" "The assault of the Trotskyists on the unity of the antifascist ranks!" . . . Who will believe that the *Communist Manifesto* was written ninety years ago?

The theoreticians of the Popular Front do not essentially go beyond the first rule of arithmetic, that is, addition: "Communists" plus Socialists plus Anarchists plus liberals add up to a total which is greater than their respective isolated numbers. Such is all their wisdom. However, arithmetic alone does not suffice here. One needs as well at least mechanics. The law of the parallelogram of forces applies to politics as well. In such a parallelogram, we know that the resultant is shorter, the more component forces diverge from each other. When political allies tend to pull in opposite directions, the resultant prove equal to zero.

A bloc of divergent political groups of the working class is sometimes completely indispensable for the solution of common practical problems. In certain historical circumstances, such a bloc is capable of attracting the oppressed petty-bourgeois masses whose interests are close to the interests of the proletariat. The joint force of such a bloc can prove far stronger than the sum of the forces of each of its component parts. On the contrary, the political alliance between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, whose interests on basic questions in the present epoch diverge at an angle of 180 degrees, as a general rule is capable only of paralyzing the revolutionary force of the proletariat.

Civil war, in which the force of naked coercion is hardly effective, demands of its participants the spirit of supreme self-abnegation. The workers and peasants can assure victory only if they wage a struggle for their own emancipation. Under these conditions, to subordinate the proletariat to the leadership of the bourgeoisie means beforehand to assure defeat in the civil war.

These simple truths are least of all the products of pure theoretical analysis. On the contrary, they represent the unassailable deduction from the entire experience of history, beginning at least with 1848. The

⁴ The Bulgarian Communist Georgi Dimitrov gave the main speech for the Popular Front policy adopted at the Comintern's Seventh Congress in 1935.

modern history of bourgeois society is filled with all sorts of Popular Fronts, i.e. the most diverse political combinations for the deception of the toilers. The Spanish experience is only a new and tragic link in this chain of crimes and betrayals.

Alliance With the Bourgeoisie's Shadow

Politically most striking is the fact that the Spanish Popular Front lacked in reality even a parallelogram of forces. The bourgeoisie's place was occupied by its shadow. Through the medium of the Stalinists, Socialists, and Anarchists, the Spanish bourgeoisie subordinated the proletariat to itself without even bothering to participate in the Popular Front. The overwhelming majority of the exploiters of all political shades openly went over to the camp of Franco. Without any theory of "permanent revolution," the Spanish bourgeoisie understood from the outset that the revolutionary mass movement, no matter how it starts, is directed against private ownership of land and the means of production, and that it is utterly impossible to cope with this movement by democratic measures.

That is why only insignificant debris from the possessing classes remained in the Republican camp: Messrs. Azaña, Companys⁵, and the like – political attorneys of the bourgeoisie but not the bourgeoisie itself. Having staked everything on a military dictatorship, the possessing classes were able, at the same time, to make use of the political representatives of yesterdays in order to paralyze, disorganize, and afterward strangle the socialist movement of the masses in "republican" territory.

Without in the slightest degree representing the Spanish bourgeoisie, the Left Republicans still less represented the workers and peasants. They represented no one but themselves. Thanks, however, to their allies – the Socialists, Stalinists, and Anarchists – these political phantoms played decisive role in the revolution. How? Very simply. By incarnating the principles of the "democratic revolution," that is, the inviolability of private property.

The Stalinists in the Popular Front

The reasons of the rise of the Spanish Popular Front and its inner mechanics are perfectly clear. The

⁵ Manuel Azaña y Díaz, leader of the Izquierda Republicana (Republican Left) was president of the Spanish Republic from May 1936 until going into exile in 1939. Luis Companys y Jover, who had been a lawyer for the anarcho-syndicalist labor federation, the CNT, was leader of the Catalan bourgeois-nationalist Esquerra Republicana and head of the government of Catalonia (the Generalitat) during the Civil War.

task of the retired leaders of the left bourgeoisie consisted in checking the revolution of the masses and the regaining for themselves the lost confidence of the exploiters: "Why do you need Franco if we, the republicans, can do the same thing?" The interests of Azaña and Companys fully coincided at this central point with the interests of Stalin, who needed gain the confidence of the French and British bourgeoisie by proving to them in action his ability to preserve "order" against "anarchy." Stalin needed Azaña and Companys as a cover before the workers: Stalin himself, of course, is for socialism, but one must take care not to repel the republican bourgeoisie! Azaña and Companys needed Stalin as an experienced executioner, with the authority of a revolutionist. Without him, so insignificant a crew never could nor would have dared to attack the workers.

The classic reformists of the Second International, long ago derailed by the course of the class struggle, began to feel a new tide of confidence, thanks to the support of Moscow. This support, incidentally, was not given to all reformists but only to those most reactionary. Caballero⁶ represented that face of the Socialist Party that was turned toward the workers' aristocracy. Negrin and Prieto⁷ always looked towards the bourgeoisie. Negrin won over Caballero with the help of Moscow. The left Socialists and Anarchists, the captives of the Popular Front, tried, it is true, to save whatever could be saved of democracy. But inasmuch as they did not dare to mobilize the masses against the gendarmes of the Popular Front, their efforts at the end were reduced to complaints and wails. The Stalinists were thus in alliance with the extreme right, avowedly bourgeois wing of the Socialist Party. They directed their repressions against the left – the POUM, the Anarchists, the "left" Socialists – in other words, against the centrist groupings who reflected, even in a most remote degree, the pressure of the revolutionary masses.

This political fact, very significant in itself, provides at the same time the measure of the degeneration of the Comintern in the last few years. I once defined Stalinism as bureaucratic centrism, and events brought a series of corroborations of the correctness of this definition. But it is obviously obsolete today. The interests of

the Bonapartist bureaucracy can no longer be reconciled with centrist hesitation and vacillation. In search of reconciliation with the bourgeoisie, the Stalinist clique is capable of entering into alliances only with the most conservative groupings among the international labor aristocracy. This has acted to fix definitively the counterrevolutionary character of Stalinism on the international arena.

Counterrevolutionary Superiorities of Stalinism

This brings us right up to the solution of the enigma of how and why the Communist Party of Spain, so insignificant numerically and with a leadership so poor in caliber, proved capable of gathering into its hands all reins of power, in the face of the incomparably more powerful organizations of the Socialists and Anarchists. The usual explanation that the Stalinists simply bartered Soviet weapons for power is far too superficial. In return for munitions, Moscow received Spanish gold. According to the laws of the capitalist market, this covers everything. How then did Stalin contrive to get power in the bargain?

The customary answer is that the Soviet government, having raised its authority in the eyes of the masses by furnishing military supplies, demanded as a condition of its "collaboration" drastic measures against revolutionists and thus removed dangerous opponents from its path. All this is quite indisputable but it is only one aspect of the matter, and the least important at that.

Despite the "authority" created by Soviet shipments, the Spanish Communist Party remained a small minority and met with ever-growing hatred on the part of the workers. On the other hand, it was not enough for Moscow to set conditions; Valencia had to accede to them. This is the heart of the matter. Not only Zamora⁸, Companys, and Negrin, but also Caballero, during his incumbency as premier, were all more or less ready to accede to the demands of Moscow. Why? Because these gentlemen themselves wished to keep the revolution within bourgeois limits. They were deathly afraid of every revolutionary onslaught of the workers.

Stalin with his munitions and with his counterrevolutionary ultimatum was a savior for all these groups. He guaranteed them, so they hoped, military victory over Franco, and at the same time, he freed them from all responsibility for the course of the revolution. They

⁶ Francisco Largo Caballero was the leader of the left wing of the Spanish Socialist Party and premier of the Spanish (bourgeois) republic from September 1936 to May 1937.

⁷ Juan Negrín López took over from Largo Caballero and was premier from 1937 until the fall of the Republic. Indalecio Prieto y Tuero was a leader of the right wing of the Socialist Party and minister of the navy and air forces under Largo Caballero and Negrín until the Stalinists forced him out in 1938.

⁸ Niceto Alcalá Zamora, a liberal Catholic, large landowner and head of the bourgeois Progressive Party, was president of the Spanish Republic from 1931 until May 1936.

hastened to put their Socialist and Anarchist masks into the closet in the hope of making use of them again after Moscow reestablished bourgeois democracy for them. As the finishing touch to their comfort, these gentlemen could henceforth, justify their betrayal to the workers by the necessity of a military agreement with Stalin. Stalin on his part justifies his counterrevolutionary politics by the necessity of maintaining an alliance with the republican bourgeoisie.

Only from this broader point of view can we get a clear picture of the angelic toleration which such champions of justice and freedom as Azana, Negrin, Companys, Caballero, Garcia Oliver, and others showed towards the crimes of the GPU. If they had no other choice, as they affirm, it was not at all because they had no means of paying for airplanes and tanks other than with the heads of the revolutionists and the rights of the workers, but because their own “purely democratic”, that is, anti-socialist, program could be realized by no other measures save terror. When the workers and peasants enter on the path of their revolution – when they seize factories and estates, drive out old owners, conquer power in the provinces – then the bourgeois counterrevolution – democratic, Stalinist, or fascist alike – has no other means of checking this movement except through bloody coercion, supplemented by lies and deceit. The superiority of the Stalinist clique on this road consisted in its ability to apply instantly measures that were beyond the capacity of Azana, Companys, Negrin, and their left allies.

Stalin Confirms in His Own Way the Correctness of the Theory of Permanent Revolution

Two irreconcilable programs thus confronted each other on the territory of republican Spain. On the one hand, the program of saving at any cost private property from the proletariat, and saving as far as possible democracy from Franco; on the other hand, the program of abolishing private property through the conquest of power by the proletariat. The first program expressed the interest of capitalism through the medium of the labor aristocracy, the top petty-bourgeois circles, and especially the Soviet bureaucracy. The second program translated into the language of Marxism the tendencies of the revolutionary mass movement, not fully conscious but powerful. Unfortunately for the revolution, between the handful of Bolsheviks and the revolutionary proletariat stood counterrevolutionary wall of the Popular Front.

The policy of the Popular Front was, in its turn, not at all determined by the blackmail of Stalin as supplier of arms. There was, of course, no lack of black-

mail. But the reason for the success of this blackmail was inherent in the inner conditions of the revolution itself. For six years, its social setting was the growing onslaught of the masses against the regime of semi-feudal and bourgeois property. The need of defending this property by the most extreme measures threw the bourgeoisie into Franco’s arms. The republican government had promised the bourgeoisie to defend property by “democratic” measures, but revealed, especially in July 1936, its complete bankruptcy. When the situation on the property front became even more threatening than on the military front, the democrats of all colors, including the Anarchists, bowed before Stalin; and he found no other methods, in his own arsenal than the methods of Franco.

The hounding of “Trotskyists”, POUMists, revolutionary Anarchists and left Socialists; the filthy slander; the false documents; the tortures in Stalinist prisons; the murders from ambush – without all this the bourgeois regime under the republican flag could not have lasted even two months. The GPU⁹ proved to be the master of the situation only because it defended the interests of the bourgeoisie against the proletariat more consistently than the others, i.e., with the greatest baseness and bloodthirstiness.

In the struggle against the socialist revolution, the “democratic” Kerensky at first sought support in the military dictatorship of Kornilov and later tried to enter Petrograd in the baggage train of the monarchist general Krasnov. On the other hand, the Bolsheviks were compelled, in order to carry the democratic revolution through to the end, to overthrow the government of “democratic” charlatans and babblers. In the process they put an end thereby to every kind of attempt at military (or “fascist”) dictatorship.

The Spanish revolution once again demonstrates that it is impossible to defend democracy against the methods of fascist reaction. And conversely, it is impossible to conduct a genuine struggle against fascism otherwise than through the methods of the proletarian revolution. Stalin waged war against “Trotskyism” (proletarian revolution), destroying democracy by the Bonapartist measures of the GPU. This refutes once again and once and for all the old Menshevik theory, adopted by the Comintern, in accordance with which the democratic and socialist revolutions are transformed into two independent historic chapters, separated from each other in point of time. The work of the Moscow executioners confirms in its own way the correctness of the theory of permanent revolution.

⁹ Stalin’s secret police.

Role of the Anarchists

The Anarchists had no independent position of any kind in the Spanish revolution. All they did was waver between Bolshevism and Menshevism. More precisely, the Anarchist workers instinctively yearned to enter the Bolshevik road (July 19, 1936, and May Days of 1937) while their leaders, on the contrary, with all their might drove the masses into the camp of the Popular Front, i.e., of the bourgeois regime.

The Anarchists revealed a fatal lack of understanding of the laws of the revolution and its tasks by seeking to limit themselves to their own trade unions, that is, to organizations permeated with the routine of peaceful times, and by ignoring what went on outside the framework of the trade unions, among the masses, among the political parties, and in the government apparatus. Had the Anarchists been revolutionists, they would first of all have called for the creation of soviets, which unite the representatives of all the toilers of city and country, including the most oppressed strata, who never joined the trade unions. The revolutionary workers would have naturally occupied the dominant position in these soviets. The Stalinists would have remained an insignificant minority. The proletariat would have convinced itself of its own invincible strength. The apparatus of the bourgeois state would have hung suspended in the air. One strong blow would have sufficed to pulverize this apparatus. The socialist revolution would have received a powerful impetus. The French proletariat would not for long permitted Leon Blum¹⁰ to blockade the proletariat revolution beyond the Pyrenees. Neither could the Moscow bureaucracy have permitted itself such a luxury. The most difficult questions would have been solved as they arose.

Instead of this, the anarcho-syndicalists, seeking to hide from "politics" in the trade unions, turned out to be, to the great surprise of the whole world and themselves, a fifth wheel in the cart of bourgeois democracy. But not for long; a fifth wheel is superfluous. After Garcia Oliver¹¹ and his cohorts helped Stalin and his henchmen to take power away from the workers, the anarchists themselves were driven out of the government of the Popular Front. Even then they found nothing better to do than jump on the victor's bandwagon and assure him of their devotion. The fear of

the petty bourgeois before the big bourgeois, of the petty bureaucrat before the big bureaucrat, they covered up with lachrymose speeches about the sanctity of the united front (between a victim and the executioners) and about the inadmissibility of every kind of dictatorship, including their own. "After all, we could have taken power in July 1936..." "After all, we could have taken power in May 1937..." The Anarchists begged Stalin-Negrín to recognize and reward their treachery to the revolution. A revolting picture!

In and of itself, this self-justification that "we did not seize power not because we were unable but because we did not wish to, because we were against every kind of dictatorship," and the like, contains an irrevocable condemnation of anarchism as an utterly anti-revolutionary doctrine. To renounce the conquest of power is voluntarily to leave the power with those who wield it, the exploiters. The essence of every revolution consisted and consists in putting a new class in power, thus enabling it to realize its own program in life. It is impossible to wage war and to reject victory. It is impossible to lead the masses towards insurrection without preparing for the conquest power.

No one could have prevented the Anarchists after the conquest of power from establishing the sort of regime they deem necessary, assuming, of course, that their program is realizable. But the Anarchist leaders themselves lost faith in it. They hid from power not because they are against "every kind of dictatorship" – in actuality, grumbling and whining, they supported and still support the dictatorship of Stalin-Negrin – but because they completely lost their principles and courage, if they ever had any. They were afraid of everything: "isolation," "involvement," "fascism." They were afraid of France and England. More than anything these phrasemongers feared the revolutionary masses.

The renunciation of the conquest of power inevitably throws every workers' organization into the swamp of reformism and turns it into a toy of the bourgeoisie; it cannot be otherwise in view of the class structure of society. In opposing the goal, the conquest of power, the Anarchists could not in the end fail to oppose the means, the revolution. The leaders of the CNT and FAI not only helped the bourgeoisie hold on to the shadow of power in July 1936; they also helped it to reestablish bit by bit what it had lost at one stroke. In May 1937, they sabotaged the uprising of the workers and thereby saved the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Thus anarchism, which wished merely to be anti-political, proved in reality to be anti-revolutionary and in the more critical moments – counterrevolutionary.

The Anarchist theoreticians, who after the great test of 1931-37 continue to repeat the old reactionary

¹⁰ As premier of the Popular Front government of France from June 1936 to June 1937, Léon Blum joined the imperialist blockade of arms to the Spanish Republic while fascist Italy and Germany funneled vast amounts of weapons to Franco.

¹¹ Right-wing anarchist leader Joan García Oliver was minister of justice in the Popular Front government of Largo Caballero. In the 1937 May Days in Barcelona, he treacherously exhorted the workers to lay down their arms.

nonsense about Kronstadt, and who affirm that “Stalinism is the inevitable result of Marxism and Bolshevism,” simply demonstrate by this they are forever dead for the revolution.

You say that Marxism is in itself depraved and Stalinism is its legitimate progeny? But why are we revolutionary Marxists engaged in mortal combat with Stalinism throughout the world? Why does the Stalinist gang see in Trotskyism its chief enemy? Why does every approach to our views or our methods of action (Durruti¹², Andres, Nin, Landau¹³, and others) compel the Stalinist gangsters to resort to bloody reprisals. Why, on the other hand, did the leaders of Spanish anarchism serve, during the time of the Moscow and Madrid crimes of the GPU, as ministers under Caballero-Negrin, that is as servants of the bourgeoisie and Stalin? Why even now, under the pretext of fighting fascism, do the Anarchists remain voluntary captives of Stalin-Negrin, the executioners of the revolution, who have demonstrated their incapacity to fight fascism?

By hiding behind Kronstadt and Makhno¹⁴, the attorneys of anarchism will deceive nobody. In the Kronstadt episode and the struggle with Makhno, we defended the proletarian revolution from the peasant counterrevolution. The Spanish Anarchists defended and continue to defend bourgeois counterrevolution from the proletariat revolution. No sophistry will delete from the annals of history the fact that anarchism and Stalinism in the Spanish revolution were on one side of the barricades while the working masses with the revolutionary Marxists were on the other. Such is the truth which will forever remain in the consciousness of the proletariat!

Role of the POUM

The record of the POUM is not much better. In the point of theory, it tried, to be sure, to base itself on the

¹² Buenaventuri Durruti was the leader of the left wing of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) and organizer of the militias. He died in the battle of Madrid in 1938.

¹³ Kurt Landau, a former leader of the German Left Opposition who broke from Trotskyism and later went to Spain to support the POUM, was kidnapped and slain by Stalin’s police.

¹⁴ In 1921, sailors at the Kronstadt naval base outside Leningrad rose up demanding “soviets without Communists.” This uprising, by a group which had escaped the worst ravages of the Civil War, established contact with the counter-revolutionary White Guards. It was a mortal threat to the Revolution and was put down by the Bolsheviks. Nestor Makhno was the anarchist leader of peasant partisan bands who after fighting Ukrainian reactionaries and the German army turned against the Bolshevik Red Army led by Trotsky at a time (1920) when the latter was battling the White Guard armies under generals Denikin and Wrangel.

formula of permanent revolution (that is why the Stalinists called the POUMists Trotskyists). But the revolution is not satisfied with theoretical avowals. Instead of mobilizing the masses against the reformist leaders, including the Anarchists, the POUM tried to convince these gentlemen of the superiorities of socialism over capitalism. This tuning fork gave the pitch to all the articles and speeches of the POUM leaders. In order not to quarrel with the Anarchist leaders, they did not form their own nuclei inside the CNT, and in general did not conduct any kind of work there. To avoid sharp conflicts, they did not carry on revolutionary work in the republican army. They built instead “their own” trade unions and “their own” militia, which guarded “their own” institutions or occupied “their own” section of the front.

By isolating the revolutionary vanguard from the class, the POUM rendered the vanguard impotent and left the class without leadership. Politically the POUM remained throughout far closer to the Popular Front, for whose left wing it provided the cover, than to Bolshevism. That the POUM nevertheless fell victim to bloody and base repressions was due to the failure of the Popular Front to fulfill its mission, namely to stifle the socialist revolution – except by cutting off, piece by piece, its own left flank.

Contrary to its own intentions, the POUM proved to be, in the final analysis, the chief obstacle on the road to the creation of a revolutionary party. The platonic or diplomatic partisans of the Fourth International like [Henk] Sneevliet, the leader of the Dutch Revolutionary Socialist Workers Party, who demonstratively supported the POUM in its halfway measures, its indecisiveness and evasiveness, in short, in its centrism, took upon themselves the greatest responsibility. Revolution abhors centrism. Revolution exposes and annihilates centrism. In passing, the revolution discredits the friends and attorneys of centrism. That is one of the most important lessons of the Spanish revolution.

The Problem of Arming

The Socialists and Anarchists who seek to justify their capitulation to Stalin by the necessity of paying for Moscow’s weapons with principles and conscience simply lie unskillfully. Of course, many of them would have preferred to disentangle themselves without murders and frame-ups. But every goal demands corresponding means. Beginning with April 1931, that is, long before the military intervention of Moscow, the Socialists and Anarchists did everything in their power to check the proletariat revolution. Stalin taught them how to carry this work to its conclusion. They became

Stalin's criminal accomplices only because they were his political cothinkers.

Had the Anarchist leaders in the least resembled revolutionists, they would have answered the first piece of blackmail from Moscow not only by continuing the socialist offensive but also by exposing Stalin's counterrevolutionary conditions before the world working class. They would have thus forced the Moscow bureaucracy to choose openly between the socialist revolution and the Franco dictatorship. The Thermidorean bureaucracy fears and hates revolution. But it also fears being strangled in a fascist ring. Besides, it depends on the workers. All indications are that Moscow would have been forced to supply arms, and possibly at more reasonable prices.

But the world does not revolve around Stalinist Moscow. During a year and a half of civil war, the Spanish industry could and should have been strengthened and developed by converting a number of civilian plants to war production. This work was not carried out only because Stalin and his Spanish allies equally feared the initiative of the workers' organizations. A strong war industry would have become a powerful instrument in the hands of the workers. The leaders of the Popular Front preferred to depend on Moscow.

It is precisely on this question that the perfidious role of the Popular Front was very strikingly revealed. It thrust upon the workers' organizations the responsibility for the treacherous deals of the bourgeoisie of Stalin. Insofar as the Anarchists remained a minority, they could not, of course, immediately hinder the ruling bloc from assuming whatever obligations they pleased toward Moscow and the masters of Moscow: London and Paris. But without ceasing to be the best fighters on the front, they could have and should have openly dissociated themselves from the betrayals and betrayers; they could and should have explained the real situation to the masses, mobilized them against the bourgeois government, and augmented their own forces from day to day in order in the end to conquer power and with it the Moscow arms.

And what if Moscow, in the absence of a Popular Front, should have refused to give arms altogether? And what, we answer to this, if the Soviet Union did not exist altogether? Revolutions have been victorious up to this time not at all thanks to high and mighty foreign patrons who supplied them with arms. As a rule, counterrevolution enjoyed foreign patronage. Must we recall the experiences of the intervention of French, English, American, Japanese, and other armies against the Soviets? The proletariat of Russia conquered domestic reaction and foreign interventionists without military support

from the outside. Revolutions succeed, in the first place, with the help of a bold social program, which gives the masses the possibility of seizing weapons that are on the territory and disorganizing the army of the enemy. The Red Army seized French, English, and American military supplies and drove the foreign expeditionary corps into the sea. Has this really been forgotten?

If at the head of the armed workers and peasants, that is, at the head of so-called republican Spain, were revolutionists and not cowardly agents of the bourgeoisie, the problem of arming would never have been paramount. The army of Franco, including the colonial Riffians¹⁵ and the soldiers of Mussolini, was not at all immune to revolutionary contagion. Surrounded by the conflagration of the socialist uprising, the soldiers of fascism would have proved to be an insignificant quantity. Arms and military "geniuses" were not lacking in Madrid and Barcelona; what was lacking was a revolutionary party!

Conditions for Victory

The conditions for victory of the masses in the civil war against the army exploiters are very simple in their essence.

The fighters of a revolutionary army must be clearly aware of the fact that they are fighting for their full social liberation and not for the reestablishment of the old ("democratic") forms of exploitation.

The workers and peasants in the rear of the revolutionary army as well as in the rear of the enemy must know and understand the same thing.

The propaganda on their own front as well as on the enemy front and in both rears must be completely permeated with the spirit of social revolution. The slogan "First victory, then reforms," is the slogan of all oppressors and exploiters from the Biblical kings down to Stalin.

Politics are determined by those classes and strata that participate in the struggle. The revolutionary masses must have a state apparatus that directly and immediately expresses their will. Only the soviets of workers', soldiers', and peasants' deputies can act as such an apparatus.

The revolutionary army must not only proclaim but also immediately realize in life the more pressing measures of social revolution in the provinces won by them: the expropriation of provisions, manufactured articles, and other stores on hand and the transfer of these to the needy; the redivision of shelter and housing in the interests of the toilers and especially of the

¹⁵ Troops from the Spanish colonial territory in northern Morocco populated by Berbers from the Rif Mountains.

May Days in Barcelona, 1937

From the outset of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936, the Stalinists used their control of the limited arms shipments from the USSR to keep CNT and POUM militias starved of weapons to fight Franco's forces, severely weakening the Aragon front. The anarchist leaders joined the (bourgeois) government in Madrid in November 1936, even as it returned occupied factories to "legal" owners, demoralizing the workers. By May 1937, the Communist Party and its Russian military advisors felt strong enough to move against the leftists. When the Stalinists sent Republican Assault Guards to seize the CNT-controlled Barcelona telephone exchange on May 3, the anarchist workers refused to hand over the strategic building they had captured from the fascists in 1936. Fighting broke out, thousands of workers rushed into the streets and barricades went up around the city (see photos below). For several days Barcelona was in the hands of the insurgent workers.

This was the key moment for a proletarian uprising against the Popular Front Catalan and Spanish Republican governments that were sabotaging the struggle against Franco out of fear of workers revolution. On May 4, the tiny Bolshevik-Leninist Section that had remained loyal to Trotskyism put out a joint appeal with the left-anarchist Amigos de Durruti for the formation of a "revolutionary junta" or soviet. But the CNT and POUM leaders negotiated a "truce" and anarchist ministers Federica Montseny and José Garía Oliver and called on Barcelona workers to lay down their arms. When they did, the central government poured troops into the city, arresting thousands of anarchists, POUMists and militia members on sight, as well as hunting down the Trotskyists. Hundreds of leftists were killed in secret prisons by the Stalinist police to demonstrate the Popular Front's determination to uphold the bourgeois order. Trotsky wrote:

"If the Catalan proletariat had seized power in May 1937 – as it had really seized it in July 1936 – they would have found support throughout all of Spain. The bourgeois-Stalinist reaction would not even have found two regiments with which to crush the Catalan workers. In the territory occupied by Franco not only the workers but also the peasants would have turned toward the Catalan proletariat, would have isolated the Fascist army and brought about its irresistible disintegration."

– "A Test of Ideas and Individuals Through the Spanish Experience" (August 1937)

In Spain it was shown that the popular front of class collaboration is paid for with workers blood.



families of the fighters; the expropriation of the land and agricultural inventory in the interests of the peasants; the establishment of workers' control and soviet power in the place of the former bureaucracy.

Enemies of the socialist revolution, that is, exploiting elements and their agents, even if masquerading as "democrats," "republicans," "Socialists," and "Anarchists," must be mercilessly driven out of the army.

At the head of each military unit must be placed commissars possessing irrefragable authority as

revolutionists and soldiers.

In every military unit there must be a firmly welded nucleus of the most self-sacrificing fighters, recommended by the workers' organizations. The members of this nucleus have but one privilege: to be first under fire.

The commanding corps necessarily includes at first many alien and unreliable elements among the personnel. Their testing, retesting, and sifting must be carried through on the basis of combat experience,

recommendations of commissars, and testimonials of rank-and-file fighters. Coincident with this must proceed an intense training of commanders drawn from the ranks of revolutionary workers.

The strategy of civil war must combine the rules of military art with the tasks of the social revolution. Not only in propaganda but also in military operations it is necessary to take into account the social composition of the various military units of the enemy (bourgeois volunteers, mobilized peasants, or as in Franco's case, colonial slaves); and in choosing lines of operation, it is necessary to rigorously take into consideration the social structure of the corresponding territories (industrial regions, peasant regions, revolutionary or reactionary, regions of oppressed nationalities, etc.). In brief, revolutionary policy dominates strategy.

Both the revolutionary government and the executive committee of the workers and peasants must know how to win the complete confidence of the army and of the toiling population.

Foreign policy must have as its main objective the awakening of the revolutionary consciousness of the workers, the exploited peasants, and oppressed nationalities of the whole world.

Stalin Guaranteed the Conditions of Defeat

The conditions for victory, as we see, are perfectly plain. In their aggregate they bear the name of the socialist revolution. Not a single one of these conditions existed in Spain. The basic reason is – the absence of a revolutionary party. Stalin tried, it is true, to transfer to the soil of Spain, the outward practices of Bolshevism: the Politburo, commissars, cells, the GPU, etc. But he emptied these forms of their social content. He renounced the Bolshevik program and with it the soviets as the necessary form for the revolutionary initiative of the masses. He placed the technique of Bolshevism at the service of bourgeois property. In his bureaucratic narrow-mindedness, he imagined that “commissars” by themselves could guarantee victory. But the commissars of private property proved capable only of guaranteeing defeat.

The Spanish proletariat displayed first-rate military qualities. 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 victory, its own organizations stood as the chief obstacles. The commanding clique of Stalinists, in accordance with their counterrevolutionary function, consisted of hirelings, careerists, declassed elements, and in general, all types

of social refuse. The representatives of other labor organizations – incurable reformists, Anarchists phrasemongers, helpless centrists of the POUM – grumbled, groaned, wavered, maneuvered, 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 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 program, 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; demoralization 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.

It ought to be added that the Spanish experience once again demonstrates that Stalin failed completely to understand either the October Revolution or the Russian Civil War. His slow-moving provincial mind lagged hopelessly behind the tempestuous march of events in 1917-21. In those of his speeches and articles in 1917 where he expressed his own ideas, his later Thermidorean “doctrine” is fully implanted. In this sense, Stalin in Spain in 1937 is the continuator of Stalin of the March 1917 conference of the Bolsheviks. But in 1917 he merely feared the revolutionary workers; in 1937 he strangled them. The opportunist had become the executioner.

“Civil War in the Rear”

But, after all, victory over the governments of Caballero and Negrín would have necessitated a civil war in the rear of the republican army! – the democratic philistine exclaims with horror. As if apart from this, in republican Spain no civil war has ever existed, and at that the basest and most perfidious one – the war of the proprietors and exploiters against the workers and peasants. This uninterrupted war finds expression in the arrests and murders of revolutionists, the crushing of the mass movement, the disarming of the workers, the arming of the bourgeois police, the abandoning of workers' detachments without arms and without help

on the front, and finally, the artificial restriction of the development of war industry.

Each of these acts as a cruel blow to the front, direct military treason, dictated by the class interests of the bourgeoisie. But “democratic” philistines – including Stalinists, Socialists, and Anarchists – regard the civil war of the bourgeoisie against the proletariat, even in areas most closely adjoining the front, as a natural and inescapable war, having as its tasks the safeguarding of the “unity of the Popular Front.” On the other hand, the civil war of the proletariat against the “republican” counterrevolution is, in the eyes of the same philistines, a criminal, “fascists,” Trotskyist war, disrupting...”the unity of the anti-fascist forces.” Scores of Norman Thomases, Major Atlees, Otto Bauers, Zyromskys, Malrauxes, and such petty peddlers of lies as Duranty and Louis Fischer spread this slavish wisdom throughout our planet.¹⁶ Meanwhile the government of the Popular Front moves from Madrid to Valencia, from Valencia to Barcelona.

If, as the facts attest, only the socialist revolution is capable of crushing fascism, then on the other hand a successful uprising of the proletariat is conceivable only when the ruling classes are caught in the vise of the greatest difficulties. However, the democratic philistines invoke precisely these difficulties as proof of the impressibility of the proletarian uprising. Were the proletariat to wait for the democratic philistines to tell them the hour of their liberation, they would remain slaves forever. To teach workers to recognize reactionary philistines under all their masks and to despise them regardless of the mask is the first and paramount duty of a revolutionist!

The Outcome

The dictatorship of the Stalinists over the republican camp is not long-lived in its essence. Should the defeats stemming from the politics of the Popular Front once more impel the Spanish proletariat to a revolutionary assault, this time successfully, the Stalinist clique will be swept away with an iron broom. But should Stalin – as is unfortunately the likelihood – succeed in bringing the work of gravedigger of the

¹⁶ Norman Thomas was head of the reformist Socialist Party in the U.S.; Clement Atlee was leader of the British Labour Party; Jean Zyromsky was a centrist French Socialist functionary; André Malraux was the French writer who flirted briefly with Trotskyism before becoming a Stalinist fellow traveler and after World War II a Gaullist; Walter Duranty was the *New York Times* correspondent in Moscow who supported Stalin against the Left Opposition; Louis Fischer was the pro-Stalinist correspondent for the liberal *Nation* who like Duranty justified the infamous 1930s purge trials.

revolution to its conclusion, he will not even this case earn thanks. The Spanish bourgeoisie needed him as executioner, but it has no need for him at all as patron or tutor. London and Paris on the one hand, and Berlin and Rome on the other, are in its eyes considerably more solvent firms than Moscow. It is possible that Stalin himself wants to cover his traces in Spain before the final catastrophe; he thus hopes to unload the responsibility for the defeat on his closest allies. After this [Soviet foreign minister Maxim] Litvinov will solicit Franco for the reestablishment of diplomatic relations. All this we have seen more than once.

Even a complete military victory of the so-called republican army over General Franco, however, would not signify the triumph of “democracy.” The workers and peasants have twice placed bourgeois republicans and their left agents in power: in April 1931 and in February 1936. Both times the heroes of the Popular Front surrendered the victory of the people to the most reactionary and the most serious representatives of the bourgeoisie. A third victory, gained by the generals of the Popular Front, would signify their inevitable agreement with the fascist bourgeoisie on the backs of the workers and peasants. Such a regime will be nothing but a different form of military dictatorship, perhaps without a monarchy and without the open domination of the Catholic Church.

Finally, it is possible that the partial victories of the republicans will be utilized by the “disinterested” Anglo-French intermediaries in order to reconcile the fighting camps. It is not difficult to understand that in the event of such a variant the final remnants of the “democracy” will be stifled in the fraternal embrace of the generals Miaja (communist!) and Franco (fascists!). Let me repeat once again: victory will go either to the socialist revolution or to fascism.

It is not excluded, by the way, that the tragedy might at the last moment make way to farce. When the heroes of the Popular Front have to flee their last capital, they might, before embarking on steamers and airplanes, perhaps proclaim a series of “socialist” reforms in order to leave a “good memory” with the people. But nothing will avail. The workers of the world will remember with hatred and contempt the parties that ruined the heroic revolution.


The tragic experience of Spain is a terrible – perhaps final – warning before still greater events, a warning addressed to all the advanced workers of the world. “Revolutions,” Marx said, “are the locomotives of history.” They move faster than the thought of semi-revolutionary or quarter-revolutionary parties. Whoever lags behind falls under the wheels of the locomotive, and consequently – and this is the chief danger – the

locomotive itself is also not infrequently wrecked.

It is necessary to think out the problem of the revolution to the end, to its ultimate concrete conclusions. It is necessary to adjust policy to the basic laws of the revolution, i.e., to the movement of the embattled classes and not the prejudices or fears of the superficial petty-bourgeois groups who call themselves "Popular" Fronts and every other kind of front. During revolution the line of least resistance is the line of greatest disaster. To fear "isolation" from the bourgeoisie is to incur isolation from the masses. Adaptation to the conservative prejudices of the labor aristocracy is betrayal of the workers and the revolution. An excess "caution" is the most baneful lack of caution. This is the chief lesson of the destruction of the most honest political organization in Spain, namely, the centrist POUM. The parties and groups of the London Bureau obviously either do not wish to draw the necessary conclusions from the last warning of history or are unable to do so. By this token they doom themselves.

By way of compensation, a new generation of revolutionists is now being educated by the lessons of the defeats. This generation has verified in action the ignominious reputation of the Second International. It has plumbed the depths of the Third International's downfall. It has learned how to judge the Anarchists not by their words but by their deeds. It is a great inestimable school, paid for with the blood of countless fighters! The revolutionary cadres are now gathering only under the banner of the Fourth International. Born amid the roar of defeats, the Fourth International will lead the toilers to victory.

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The Stalin School of Falsification Revisited

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4. THE POPULAR FRONT

The turn toward the “Popular Front” came toward the end of 1933 as the Stalinized Communist International made a quick about-face from its ultra-left “Third Period” policies. With the triumph of Hitler and the renewed threat of imperialist attack the panic-stricken Soviet bureaucracy set about lining up allies for defense of the Soviet fatherland. Russia entered the League of Nations and signed a Franco-Soviet military assistance pact. Throughout this period the Comintern sought to ingratiate itself with the bourgeoisies of the democratic imperialist powers through calculated containment of revolutionary proletarian movements in Europe. The method: class-collaborationist alliances with and participation in the governments of the bourgeoisie. The cover: the struggle against fascism.

The popular front found theoretical expression in the report of Georgi Dimitrov to the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in August 1935. According to Dimitrov the main danger now threatening the workers was fascism. But fascism threatened not only the working class, but also the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie in general and even sections of the bourgeoisie. In consequence, the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat and socialism are removed from the agenda during the present period:

“Now the toiling masses in a number of capitalist countries are faced with the necessity of making a *definite* choice, and of making it today, not between proletarian dictatorship and bourgeois democracy, but between bourgeois democracy and fascism.”

To defend bourgeois democracy, the proletariat must aim to ally with all other social groups threatened by fascism, including the “anti-fascist” sections of the bourgeoisie in a vast “People's Front”:

“Under certain conditions, we can and must bend our efforts to the task of drawing these parties and organizations or certain sections of them to the side of the anti-fascist people's front, despite their bourgeois leadership. Such, for instance, is today the situation in France with the Radical Party....”
--G. Dimitrov, “Report to the Seventh Comintern Congress,” 1935

During the Third Period the Communists refused to bloc with the German Social Democrats in a united

front against Hitler, dubbing them “social-fascists.” Now the Communists are not only willing to make ongoing alliances with the social democracy, but to form a government with the anti-fascist sectors of the bourgeoisie itself! Subsequently, in Italy during the late 1930's this “broad alliance” was still further broadened to include appeals to “honest” fascists!

The popular front is nothing more than an expression of the theories and practices of class collaboration – a bloc of organizations and parties representing various classes on the basis of a common program, the defense of bourgeois democracy. Though the name was new, the content was not. The German Social Democrats formed “left bloc” coalition governments with the democratic bourgeoisie (in the form of the Center Party) throughout the 1920's. The only difference was that the Communists occasionally made a pretense of being revolutionary, while the Social Democrats were more open about their reformism.

The Stalinists try to claim that the popular front is simply the logical extension of the united front to a higher plane. Nothing could be further from the truth. The “working-class united front” was formed under the banner of “class against class” and was raised precisely in order to break the Social Democrats away from their perennial class-collaborationist alliances with the “democratic” bourgeoisie:

“The tactic of the United Front is the call for the united struggle of Communists and of all other workers, either belonging to other parties and groups, or belonging to no party whatever, for the defense of the elementary and vital interests of the working class against the bourgeoisie.”
–Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), “Theses on the United Front,” 1922

The united front served both to join the forces of the various workers organizations in action and also to expose the reformists who would participate in struggles for working-class interests only when forced to do so by pressure from their base, and who would desert at the earliest possible moment. Since the Bolshevik party *alone* represented the true historical interests of the working class, it was crucial that there be no common program with the reformists, since this could only mean the abandonment of the Leninist program. Nor

could there be any restrictions on the right to criticize the other parties to the front. Hence the second main slogan of the united front, “freedom of criticism, unity in action” or, as Trotsky put it, “march separately, strike together.”

In the popular front, however, the proletarian parties renounce their class independence and give up their working-class program. Earl Browder summed this up succinctly in his report to the Central Committee of the CPUSA on 4 December 1936:

“We can organize and rouse them [the majority of “the people”] provided we do not demand of them that they agree with our socialist program, but unite with them on the basis of their program which we also make our own.” [!]

The popular front conformed with the Menshevik theory of the “two-stage revolution.” First the struggle for bourgeois democracy, then the struggle for the overthrow of capitalism. The Stalinists proceeded from the absolutely false conception that a basic social conflict existed between bourgeois democracy and fascism. Fascism appeared in Europe following World War I as a necessary development of bourgeois rule in a period of severe economic decline. It is a last resort of the capitalists to preserve their system when it is no longer possible through normal parliamentary measures. The Stalinists at one point even tried to justify their two-stage schema by claiming that fascism actually had its roots in feudalism, not capitalism!

In point of fact, the popular front was simply another bourgeois solution to the conditions which led to fascism. The Communists or Social Democrats are invited to participate in a capitalist government under conditions in which no existing bourgeois parliamentary combination can effectively rule over a restive mass of workers and peasants. The price of the coalition is Communist support to strikebreaking and similar measures by the governments in which they participate.

During the 1930's popular-front governments were realized during pre-revolutionary periods in France and Spain. There the coalition with the “democratic” bourgeoisie was able to head off powerful mass upsurges by diverting the general strikes and even insurrections into the dead-end of defending bourgeois democracy. In colonial countries, such as Vietnam, the popular-front policies led to dropping the demand for independence! To the Stalinists’ class collaboration, the Trotskyists counterposed a working-class united front to smash the fascists. Instead of depending on the republican generals and the police, they called for the formation of workers militias based on the trade unions. Weak in numbers and subject to vicious slander campaigns by the Comintern, the Trotskyists, were

unable to gain sufficient influence to break through the reformist stranglehold on the workers movement. Time and again the positions of the Bolshevik-Leninists were proved correct, but in a negative way, by the ignominious defeat of promising revolutionary situations. Stalin certainly earned the nickname Trotsky had given him – the Great Organizer of Defeats.

France 1934-1936

In France fascist agitation made more headway than in any other of the “great democracies.” Fascist leagues appeared in open imitation of the Italian and German fascist organizations. After years of ignoring or downplaying the fascist danger the Communist (PCF) and Socialist (SFIO) leaders panicked after the February 1934 attack on parliament by the Croix de Feu (Cross of Fire) band. Under tremendous pressure from the ranks, the Socialist and Communist-led trade-union federations held a massive joint demonstration on 12 February whose very size served effectively to throw back the fascists for months. Trotsky’s struggle of the past four years for a workers united front against fascism had been vindicated against the sectarian-defeatist idiocies of the Third Period.

In June 1934 PCF leader Maurice Thorez proposed a united front with the SFIO, The united front did not adopt the Leninist slogan of “march separately, strike together,” but instead took the form of a “nonaggression pact.” Both parties renounced their programmatic independence and ceased to criticize each other. Trotsky criticized the united front for limiting its actions to parliamentary maneuvers and electoral alliances and refusing to seek to arouse the workers in extra-parliamentary struggle against fascism, a struggle which might have opened up the prospect for proletarian revolution.

In the midst of acute social crisis, mass strike waves and readiness to fight of the workers, the PCF refused to struggle for power on the basis that the situation was “not revolutionary.” Instead, the PCF put forth a program of “immediate economic demands” which served to disorient and disorganize the proletariat and speed the growth of fascism since the capitalists felt increasing threat from the working class. The PCF renounced the struggle for nationalization, opposed the call for workers militias as provocative and refused arms to the workers, while trying to preserve a fig-leaf of revolutionism by absurdly calling for “soviets everywhere,” the immediate precondition for an armed insurrection.

In July 1935 the French Stalinists expanded the coalition to include the bourgeois Radical Socialists. The Radical Socialists, based on the urban and rural

petty bourgeoisie, advocated progressive social changes but were firmly committed to private enterprise and private ownership. In order to save unity with the Radicals the PCF insisted that the popular-front program be restricted to defense of the republic against fascism, measures against the depression and labor reforms. The popular front swept the March 1936 elections. The SFIO became the leading party in the Chamber of Deputies, and their chief, Leon Blum, became premier of a coalition cabinet of Socialists and Radical Socialists. The Communists refused to enter the government in order to avoid scaring the bourgeoisie but supported it in parliament.

As frequently occurs at the beginning of a popular-front government, the masses saw the elections as a victory for the working class and unleashed a tremendous wave of militancy culminating in the May-June general strike. While the initial demands were mainly defensive, centering on a 15 percent wage increase, the strikes almost all involved the militant sit-down tactic. The bourgeoisie panicked, demanding that the Blum government take office immediately in order to contain the strike. Blum and the CGT labor bureaucrats negotiated an initial settlement which provided some gains, but on the condition of the immediate evacuation of the factories. The pact was solidly voted down by Parisian metal workers.

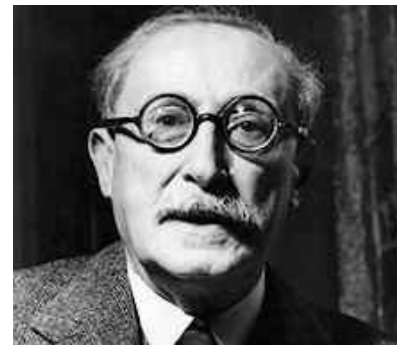
Fearing that, as Trotsky wrote, “the French Revolution has begun,” the PCF ordered its militants to support the agreements. Thorez declared, “There can be no question of taking power at this time” and “one must know how to end a strike.” The Socialist-Radical government did its part by seizing the issue of the Trotskyist newspaper (*Lutte Ouvrière*) which called for extending the strike. By the middle of June the combined efforts of the reformists had succeeded in scuttling the resistance.

This was the high point of the popular front, for it was in breaking the 1936 general strike that the Blum government accomplished the basic task set for it by the bourgeoisie – stopping the drift toward revolution. The few significant social reforms, such as the 40-hour week, were soon reversed. In 1937, after a year in of-



French unionists from the Renault Billancourt plant in Paris during the June 1936 general strike. Workers raised the red flag over the plant. The first task of the Popular Front Blum government was to end the strike.

fice and having lost the confidence of the working masses, the Blum government was toppled by the Senate. In mid-1938 the Radical Socialists formed a conservative ministry under Edouard Daladier. Daladier’s an-



Léon Blum

announcement that fall of a return to the 48-hour week provoked a new mass strike wave. The response of the PCF: a call for a one-day protest strike! Daladier declared martial law and sent troops to the factories. The labor movement collapsed, millions of workers tore up their union cards in disgust. By January the PCF had been banned, and all Communist led unions were banned from the UGT labor federation. In June 1940 the bourgeois parties, as well as some SFIO delegates, voted to create the Vichy regime. Thus, far from stopping fascism, the popular front proved to be just one more “peaceful road” to barbarism.

The Popular Front in Spain, 1936-1939

The consequences of the Stalin-Dimitrov popular front policies were equally counterrevolutionary in Spain. The overthrow of the monarchy in 1931 had led to the establishment of a bourgeois republic, but the

social policies of the Radical/Socialist coalition government were hardly more liberal than those of the military dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera during the late 1920's (also supported by the Socialists). In October 1934 an insurrection broke out in the mining region of Asturias in reaction to the rightist policies of the government. Despite bloody repression (thousands of miners were machine-gunned by the military), the heroic uprising awakened the Spanish working masses and led to the widespread formation of united-front workers committees (*alianzas obreras*).

In response, the leaders of the major workers parties moved to set up a popular front similar to that in France, including the Socialists (right and left wings), the Communists and also the POUM (the Workers Party of Marxist Unification). The POUM had been formed by the fusion of a right split-off from the CP (Maurin's "Workers and Peasants Bloc" which Trotsky had referred to as the "Spanish Kuomintang," i.e., a two-class party) and the former Communist Left headed by Nin. As a result of forming an unprincipled bloc with Maurin and signing the popular-front agreement, the ties between Nin and the Trotskyist movement were broken.

The popular-front agreement signed in January 1936 was a classic document of the abandonment of working-class politics. It pledged:

"The republicans do not accept the principle of the nationalization of the land and its free reversion to the peasants....The republican parties do not accept measures for nationalization of the banks...[and] workers control claimed by the delegation of the Socialist Party."

The republican/worker alliance won a plurality in the February 1936 elections, however, and formed a government under the bourgeois lawyer Azaña. As in France, the masses interpreted this as a victory and began a wave of land and factory occupations which the government was unable to contain. In consequence, on 17 July [1936] General Franco and a group of leading military officers issued a proclamation for an authoritarian Catholic state and went into rebellion. The response of the Azana government was to attempt to negotiate with the insurgent generals, meanwhile refusing to arm the masses!

This temporizing might have succeeded if the masses of workers had not taken matters into their own hands. In Barcelona, a stronghold of the Anarchists and the POUM, workers took over numerous factories and stormed the army barracks with pistols. In less than a day they had complete control of the city. This sparked similar revolts elsewhere, and the republican government was forced to reverse itself, arm the masses and

attempt a half-hearted struggle against Franco.

The alternative was a proletarian revolution which was possible at any moment. In Catalonia transport and industry were almost entirely in the hands of the CNT (Anarchist) workers committees, while in much of the northeast (Catalonia and Aragon) the peasant associations and agricultural workers unions had set up collective farms. The old municipal governments disappeared, replaced by committees giving representation to all anti-fascist parties and unions. The most important was the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias of Catalonia which, although it had bourgeois members, was thoroughly dominated by the workers organizations. Yet on top of this sat the "shadow of the bourgeoisie," a popular-front government of Catalonia headed by another bourgeois lawyer, Companys. As in Russia from February to October 1917 there was a situation of dual power, but with the workers still giving tacit support to the shaky bourgeois government.

In this situation, Lenin and the Bolsheviks had demanded, "Down with the Provisional Government, All Power to the Soviets!" The Spanish workers parties, however, from the Stalinists to the POUM and even the Anarchists (who supposedly opposed even a workers government!) joined the bourgeois government in September 1936. The Stalinists assured their bourgeois friends that they had no intention of leading the workers to power. In August 1936 the PCF newspaper *L'Humanité* stated:

"The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Spain requests us to inform the public...that the Spanish people are not striving for the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, but know only one aim: the defense of the republican order while respecting private property."

With support of the Stalinists and Socialists guaranteed, Azaña and Companys began moving to re-establish bourgeois law and order. The first step was censorship of the workers press. The Catalan government followed this up with a decree dissolving the revolutionary committees which had arisen in July, and in late October it ordered the disarming of the workers in the rear. The POUM and CNT leaders were subsequently expelled from the cabinet, even though they had gone along with all these anti-worker measures. A secret police was organized, under the control of the Stalinist and GPU agents from the Soviet Union.

But this was not enough to break the back of the worker's resistance. A provocation was required. This came on 3 May 1937 when the Stalinists attacked the Barcelona telephone exchange held by CNT workers. Within hours barricades were erected throughout the city and the workers were once again in a position to

take power. Instead the POUM and Anarchist leaders capitulated to the central government, trusting in Azaña's pledge of no reprisals. Two days later the Assault Guards arrived and occupied the exchange, killing hundreds and jailing tens of thousands. Within a month the POUM was outlawed, at the demand of the Stalinists, and its leaders arrested and eventually shot. In short order the CP led the Assault Guards in dissolving the collective farms and workers militias. Although the war dragged on for another year and a half, the result was already decided – since the workers and peasants no longer had anything to fight for, they became rapidly demoralized and the superior armaments of the fascists carried the day.

In all this the Spanish CP had acted as the guarantor of bourgeois order, leading the offensive against the Anarchists and the POUM, the collective farms and the workers militias. In his desperate desire to achieve an alliance with--the “democratic” imperialist powers, Stalin was absolutely opposed to revolution in Spain – even if this meant that fascist victory was the alternative. The Great Organizer of Defeats was also the Butcher of the Spanish Revolution.

But the responsibility for the debacle does not stop here. Nin and the other leaders of the Communist Left had once fought for the class independence of the proletariat. At one time they were a larger party than the Spanish CP itself. But by capitulating to the popular front, these centrists were as responsible for the defeat of the Spanish revolution as Stalin. Had they known how to swim against the stream in moments when the popular front had mass support they could have earned the leadership of the workers movement when the masses later came to see that they had been betrayed. As it was the POUM went along with the betrayals, protesting only when it was too late.

The Popular Front in World War II

It is remarkable that in [*Guardian* editor Carl] Davidson's attack on Trotskyism, in addition to virtually ignoring the October 1917 Russian Revolution and the ignominious defeat of Stalin's policies in Germany, he does not mention Stalin's policies in Spain and France at all. And with good reason! But as a good Stalinist he must defend the popular front somehow, preferably with a more popular example. He chose World War II. According to the Stalinists, this was a war against fascism and in defense of the Soviet fatherland. Their political conclusion was a broad popular front “including even the temporary and wavering allies to be found in the camp of the bourgeois-democratic capitalist governments” (*Guardian*, 9 May 1973).

Davidson gives a somewhat accurate account of the Trotskyist position on the war, presuming that nobody could have opposed the great anti-fascist crusade except counterrevolutionary Trotskyists. But while the Stalinist policy was certainly more popular at the time, it will not wash so easily with a new generation of worker-militants who have far less illusions about the “democratic” character of U.S. imperialism. The Trotskyist position on the war was revolutionary defeatism in the capitalist countries in this *inter-imperialist* war. At the same time they gave unconditional support to the military defense of the Soviet Union. This was no academic question, for Trotsky fought a sharp battle against the Shachtman group (in the then-Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party) which was opposed to defense of the USSR, and eventually left the SWP taking 40 percent of the membership with it.

During the war the numerically weak Trotskyist cadre by and large carried out an internationalist line, despite social-patriotic bulges in some of the sections. The French section, for instance, organized a Trotskyist cell in the German navy. In the process, however, many of the leaders of the Fourth International were executed either by the Nazis or, like Nin in Spain, at the hands of the Stalinists. In the U.S. the SWP concentrated its work on fighting the no strike agreement supported by the CIO leadership and the CP.

The Stalinists had the opposite policy. According to CPUSA leader Earl Browder:

“In the United States we have to win the war under the capitalist system....Therefore, we have to find out how to make the capitalist system work....We have to help the capitalists to learn how to run their system.”

The *Daily Worker* of 25 December 1941 implemented this policy by hailing the CIO no-strike pledge as a “definite contribution to national unity.” What this meant in practice was strike-breaking. During the 1943 mine workers' strike, CP labor leader William Z. Foster traveled the Pennsylvania mining districts trying to organize scabs and a “back-to-work” movement. On the West Coast, CP-sympathizer Bridges of the ILWU called for speed-up.

Thus throughout the 1930's and 1940's the popular front policy led to the identical practical result: strikebreaking and counterrevolution. The strangulation of the Spanish revolution, the defeat of the French general strike, scabbing in the U.S. miners' strike--these were the fruits of class collaboration. Drawing the logical conclusion, Stalin made another concession to his bourgeois friends by dissolving the Communist International in 1943 because it hindered a united effort to win the war!

Chilean Popular Front

The following article is reprinted from Spartacist No. 19, November-December 1970.

The electoral victory of Dr. Salvador Allende's Popular Front coalition in Chile poses in sharpest form the issue of revolution or counterrevolution. The Chilean crisis is a fully classic expression of reformism's attempt to derail the felt needs of the working people for their own government to rule society in their own interests. The revolutionary duty of Marxists in Chile and internationally should be utterly unambiguous. Above all, the experience of the Russian Revolution and of Trotsky's critiques of the Spanish and French Popular Front governments of 1936 illuminate the objective of revolutionists in such a situation.

Dr. Allende's candidacy, which gained a plurality on 4 Sept. [1970], was based on a coalition of reformist-labor and liberal-bourgeois parties, including the pro-Moscow Communist Party, Allende's own somewhat more radical Socialist Party, the very right-wing Social Democrats, the rump of the liberal Radical Party, fragments of the Christian Democrats, etc. To gain confirmation by the Congress, Allende agreed to a series of constitutional amendments at the insistence of the dominant Christian Democrats. Most crucial among these were the prohibition of private militias and the stipulation that no police or military officers will be appointed who were not trained in the established academies.

With the maintenance of the foundations of the capitalist order thus assured, Congress elected Allende president on 24 October. He has now announced the division of spoils in his 15-man cabinet: the CP gets economic ministries, Allende's SP the key posts of internal security and foreign affairs, and a bourgeois Radical the ministry of national defense. This is reformism's answer to the Chilean masses' years of struggle and their desperate hopes that Allende's election would open up for them a new way of life, but they will not be held for long inside the Popular Front's bourgeois straight jacket.

It is the most elementary duty for revolutionary Marxists to irreconcilably oppose the Popular Front



Salvador Allende greeting crowd after election victory in September 1970.

in the election and to place absolutely no confidence in it in power. Any "critical support" to the Allende coalition is class treason, paving the way for a bloody defeat for the Chilean working people when domestic reaction, abetted by international imperialism; is ready. The U.S. imperialists have been able to temporize for the moment – and not immediately try to mobilize a counterrevolutionary coup on the usual Latin American model – because they have softened the anticipated nationalization losses through massive profit-taking over several years.

Within reformist workers' parties there is a profound contradiction between their proletarian base and formal ideology and the class-collaborationist aims and personal appetites of their leaderships. This is why Marxists, when they are not themselves embodied in a mass working-class party, give reformist parties such "critical support" -against overt agents of capital -as will tend to regroup the proletarian base around a revolutionary program. But when these parties enter a coalition government with the parties of capitalism, any such "critical support" would be a betrayal because the coalition has suppressed the class contradiction in the bourgeoisie's favor. It is our job then to recreate the basis for struggle within such parties by demanding they break with the coalition. This break must be the elementary precondition for even the most critical support.

The Left Views Chile

Chile's most extreme known formation, the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, comprising Guevarists, semi-Trotskyists, etc., demonstrated conciliationism toward Allende as his campaign wore on and on 4 Sept. issued a call for the workers, students and peasants to support his victory, thus throwing their weight behind the popular illusions.

While the "revolutionary" Chinese Maoists have been very diplomatically noncommittal, for Gus Hall of the U.S. CP, "the elections in Chile are a revolutionary, democratic mandate of the people." He goes on, "Does this experience deny the theses of Debray [i.e. Guevara and Castro] and Mao? Yes it does." (*Daily World*, 17 Oct.) Not to be outdone in enthusiasm, Castro's *Granma* of 13 Sept. headlined Allende's election as "The Victory of People's Unity," thus willy-nilly sharing the same bed with Gus Hall and once again exposing as political charlatans those who preach confidence in the Cuban leadership.

Tragically, most of those formations claiming the heritage of Trotsky's Fourth International have taken the same road, in disorientation or conciliation to Popular Frontism. At its April 1969 World Congress the United Secretariat majority around Livio Maitan affirmed that the strategy for Latin America was "rural guerrilla warfare" with a peasant base and a petty-bourgeois (student) derived cadre, thus rendering themselves irrelevant in the face of urban-based upheavals in Latin America. How about the United Secretariat minority, grouped around the American Socialist Workers Party? Their spokesman, Joe Hansen, stood on apparent Trotskyist orthodoxy, seemingly rediscovering the need to build revolutionary workers' parties as the key to the Latin American revolution, but this was just a fig leaf to cover the SWP's descent into legalistic reformism. The first response of Hansen's *Intercontinental Press* (14 Sept.) was agnostic, concluding, "Undoubtedly Allende's program is more radical, on paper, than the program of the Popular Front of 1938. But it remains to be seen what his bourgeois allies, present and prospective; will allow him to put into practice."

Behind the SWP's bland know-nothingism was its operational position: critical support: "It would be a crime to whitewash the UP [Unidad Popular]. But failing to recognize the positive elements in it, condemning it in toto out of some sectarian dogmatism, would mean suicidal isolation." (*IP*, 5 Oct.) To be sure, the SWP "knows better." But after all the Allende candidacy was enormously popular among the Chilean masses, so these revisionists chose to feed the illusions

which block the path to socialist revolution and expose the workers, in this situation of great social polarization, to the danger of victorious reaction and right-wing terror.

Healy's Pabloism

The alleged anti-revisionists of Gerry Healy's "Fourth International" stand only quantitatively to the left of the SWP; they are just more critical within the same framework. Healy's *Workers Press* of 12 Sept. concludes, "There must be a preparation for class action to defend Allende's victory and his election programs to meet this danger." And the U.S. Workers League¹⁷ states: "There is only one road and that is the revolutionary road of the October Revolution... As a step in this understanding the workers must hold Allende to his promises..." (*Bulletin*, 21 Sept.) – invoking the October Revolution, they demand the masses should compel an essentially bourgeois government to achieve socialism!

Not surprisingly, during the 1917 February Revolution in Russia the vacillating resident Bolsheviks, including Stalin, came up with the very formula the WL has rediscovered: to support the provisional government "insofar as it struggles against reaction or counterrevolution." Lenin telegraphed his protest from abroad: "Our tactic: absolute lack of confidence; no support to the new government; suspect Kerensky especially; arming of the proletariat the sole guarantee; . . . no rapprochement with other parties." All we could add today is to repeat Trotsky's fundamental conclusion about our epoch that the time has never been more urgent for the building of the international party imbued with Leninist aims and Lenin's determination. ■

¹⁷ The Workers League, then led by Tim Wohlforth, was the U.S. affiliate of Gerry Healy's International Committee of the Fourth International. It later changed its name to the Socialist Equality Party.

Smash the Reactionary Junta – For Workers Revolution in Chile!

The following article was issued as a special supplement to Workers Vanguard the day after the bloody Chilean coup led by General Augusto Pinochet on 11 September 1973.

SEPTEMBER 12 – Yesterday’s rightist coup in Chile put a bloody end to the three-year-old Popular Unity government headed by President Salvador Allende. This seizure of power by the military is a serious defeat for the international working class, leading to a naked assault against the workers’ organizations and to the massacre of possibly thousands of proletarian militants. It is not yet clear to what extent the Chilean workers and peasants will forcibly resist the putschists; their heroic will to defend their organizations is not in doubt, but the Allende government consistently refused to arm the workers. It is the duty of all U.S. working-class organizations, both trade unions and parties, to launch an immediate, united-front protest against the counterrevolutionary coup. Smash the reactionary junta – For workers revolution in Chile!

The events of the last two days tragically confirm the Spartacist League’s warnings that the Chilean working people would pay in blood for the treachery of their leaders. The triumph of bourgeois reaction after three years of the Allende government was no accident! It was prepared by the very nature of the Unidad Popular (UP – Popular Unity) coalition.

As the Spartacist League insisted in a leaflet issued on September 4:

“The government of the Unidad Popular is not a workers government. It is a coalition of workers and capitalist parties. The presence of the ‘radical’ bourgeoisie and the ‘democratic’ generals is a guarantee that the Allende government will not step beyond the bounds of capitalism. Their presence is a guarantee that the workers and peasants will be left disarmed and atomized in the face of the impending rightist coup. Rather than pressuring Allende ... we must instead call on the workers to break sharply with the bourgeois popular front and the government parties, to fight for a workers and peasants government based on a revo-



La Moneda, Chile’s presidential palace, being bombarded by air force jets during 11 September 1973 coup d’état.

lutionary program of expropriation of the agrarian and industrial bourgeoisie.”

The seductive claims of the dominant workers parties that socialism could be won through elections and parliamentary action and in collaboration with “progressive” sections of the bourgeoisie have again proven to be simply the formula for defeat. The so-called “Chilean road to socialism” was lauded the world over by pro-Moscow Communist parties as the model of revolution through peaceful coexistence; and the Chilean capitalists – touted as the most “democratic” bourgeoisie of Latin America, with the most “non-political” military – were supposed to passively acquiesce to the transition to socialism!

But only the independence class mobilization of the proletariat to seize state power in its own name can open the road to socialism. A popular front is by its very nature – its alliance with a section of the ruling class – confined within the bounds of capitalism. It can never prepare the way for workers power. It can succeed only in frightening the forces of bourgeois reaction to the point that they undertake a concerted and brutal assault on the workers, in alienating and driving into the arms of reaction sections of the petty bourgeoisie which would have split if faced with a clear

proletarian pole, and in disorienting the workers through class-collaborationist illusions so that they cannot mobilize an organized and united self-defense against the rightist reaction. The lesson of Chile today is the lesson of the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s: if the workers do not learn in time that popular fronts, parliamentarism and peaceful coexistence lead to defeat, they will pay with their lives.

What Was the Popular Unity?

The Popular Unity coalition was made up of the dominant workers parties, the reformist Communists and Socialists, together with the Radical Party and left Christian Democrats. Since the 1970 elections both the Radicals and left Christian Democrats have had splits, with pro-UP sections moving leftward and even claiming to support socialism. But the essence of the Popular Unity as a bloc with a section of the bourgeoisie was not changed. The UP government from the beginning rested on a tacit agreement with the dominant bourgeois party, the Christian Democrats, without whose votes Allende could not get a single one of his reforms passed by Congress. More recently as the rightist attack on the government sharpened, the role of chief guarantor of the interests of the bourgeoisie within the government was taken over by the military ministers.

The government adopted a policy of appeasing the rightists and increasing repression of the workers. Thus after the “bosses’ work stoppage” (*paro patronal*) by the truck owners and shopkeepers during November 1972, Allende invited the military leaders into the government and promulgated a law which permits unannounced raids by the military in search of arms. This law, though ostensibly directed against both right- and left-wing extremists, has in fact been used exclusively against the unions, the occupied factories and the workers parties, while fascist groups such as *Patria y libertad* built up sizeable arms stockpiles. Then during May and June the government provoked a copper miners’ strike at the El Teniente mine by attempting to do away with the sliding scale of wages (cost-of-living escalator) and turned machine guns on the workers during the course of the strike (see *WV* No. 23, 22 June 1973).

Popular Front and Parliamentary Cretinism

Although the reformists have constantly attempted to portray Chile as the most radical popular-front government in history (compared to Spain 1936-39, France 1933-36 or Chile at different times from 1936 to 1948), the myth is far from reality. Thus in Spain



Fidel Castro reviews Chilean troops together with supposed “constitutionalist” official, General Pinochet, who ten months later carried out his bloody coup.

the industrial centers were entirely in the hands of workers militias for much of the period after July 1936 and most of the factories were operated under workers control. In Chile, Allende signed an agreement in 1970 not to permit the formation of workers militias nor to promote officers from outside the graduates of the military academies, thus guaranteeing that the army would remain firmly under the control of the professional military elite. The Spanish workers were armed; for the most part, Chilean workers are not.

But a popular front is a popular front. The Spanish workers were defeated by Franco because they did not have a revolutionary leadership which struggled to overthrow capitalism. Instead the workers and peasants were constrained by the Stalinist Communist Party and the Assault guards to remain within the bounds of bourgeois democracy. In their more honest moments the Stalinists would justify this in terms of not “scaring the bourgeoisie,” but they also had a theory to justify it. While Lenin had made the slogan “All

Power to the Soviets” world-famous as a call for a workers revolution, Stalin “discovered” in 1924 that before the stage of soviets there had to come an intermediate “democratic” stage. In essence this was identical to the position of the reformist social democrats, who called for winning power through parliamentary elections as a ‘step’ in the gradual transformation of capitalism. Now in the 1970s this theory was resurrected by Allende’s UP:

“Since the national Congress is based on the people’s vote, there is nothing in its nature which prevents it from changing itself in order to become, in fact, the Parliament of the People. The Chilean Armed Forces and the Carabineros, faithful to their duty and to their tradition of non-intervention in the political process, will support a social organization which corresponds to the will of the people.”

—S. Allende, “First Message to Congress” (December 1970)

Historical experience again disproved this reformist fairy tale yesterday for the nth time!

The Chilean CP has throughout lived up to its Stalinist mission of reformist betrayal. Thus, in line with the Stalinists’ call to broaden the Popular Unity to include the Christian Democrats, they also opposed an extensive program of nationalizations. In order to “regularize the economy” CP minister Orlando Millas introduced legislation which would restrict nationalizations to certain specific sectors and return factories occupied by the workers to their “legal” owners. The CP not only opposed the formation of workers militias, but Luis Corvalán, secretary-general of the party, rejected any form of arming the workers since such proposals “are equivalent to showing distrust in the army.” (This is, of course, true. And the Stalinists, of course, never show distrust in the bourgeois army. Thus even after yesterday’s coup, the *Daily World* [12 September 1973] claimed only “a section” of the armed forces were involved, particularly the “traditionally upper middle-class Air Force.” The army no doubt appreciated this “trust,” which facilitated the generals’ reactionary coup.)

Shortly before the coup, French CP leader Bernard Fajon returning from Chile held a press conference in order to denounce:

“... certain economic theories which put the accent on the destruction of the old structures....

“The occupation of the factories by the workers ... transformed in certain cases into taking possession of companies not included in the program of nationalizations....

“... irresponsible and adventurist positions, such

as a the leftist slogan of calling on the soldiers to disobey [orders], which facilitates the efforts of officers favorable to a coup d’état; such as the leftist slogan of exclusive workers control in all factories, tending to line up the engineers and professionals against the working class....

“The Communist Party of Chile has led and leads the most consistent struggle against these absolutely crazy views....”

Meanwhile, as the CP was clamoring to unite with the Christian Democrats and disarm the “ultra-leftists,” calling on the workers to give up the factories to their legal owners, the Soviet Union gave practically nothing in the way of economic aid to Chile. The utter cynicism which lies behind the Stalinists’ calls for “unity of all democratic forces” (i.e., including the Christian Democrats in Chile who just helped prepare a counterrevolutionary coup, and such liberal U.S. Democrats as Lyndon Johnson) can be seen in Angela Davis’ foolish remark at a pro-Allende rally following the coup: “I don’t think it’s a defeat, it’s a setback of course” (*New York Times*, 12 September). With setbacks like this, what would a real defeat look like?

But the class-collaborationist logic of Stalinism is not limited to the direct followers of Brezhnev and Kosygin. The erstwhile guerrilla warrior Fidel Castro made his support for the bourgeois UP government clear in all of its glory during his November 1971 visit when he called on copper workers at the Chuquibambilla mine to moderate their wage demands and work harder. A few months later he again expressed his “anti-imperialist” solidarity by inviting Chilean generals to visit Cuba.

Preparation of the Coup

In order to excuse their own betrayals in Chile the Stalinists are now claiming that the coup is the work of fascists and extreme reactionaries in league with the CIA. There is no doubt that the ultra-right provided leadership of the coup and it was in contact with the U.S. government. ITT’s offer of \$1 million in 1970 to dump Allende is certainly not unrelated to the ‘accidental’ presence of American navy ships in Chilean waters on the day of the coup.

But to hold only the “ultras” and the CIA responsible for the coup is to ignore the bulk of the Chilean bourgeoisie. The CP wants us to believe that only American capitalists will protect their property! In reality, the Chilean capitalists saw the handwriting on the wall as workers committees took over hundreds of factories following the abortive coup on June 29; they were joined by the military general staff after the discovery of leftist cells in the navy in early August. The

September 11 coup is their answer. This coup was no fascist plot or the work of a few military “ultras.” It represents the decision by *the key sectors of the bourgeoisie* to smash the increasingly militant workers movement. Every important section of the Chilean capitalist class, including the “moderate” Christian Democrats and the “constitutionalist” officers, is involved in one way or another.

That its real aim is to smash the workers movement was amply proven on the first day of military rule. The fall of the government was quickly, almost surgically, accomplished by a classic *pronunciamento* by the heads of the armed forces and a short bombardment of the presidential palace. The presidential guard surrendered, while Allende either committed suicide or was shot. But during the first day of military rule, more than 1,000 people were killed and more than 100 leaders of workers parties and unions arrested. The generals threatened to blow up any factory which resisted.

Their particular concern was the mushrooming workers committees (the “*cordones industriales*”) in the industrial belts around Santiago. The *New York Times* (12 September 1973) reported: “In the proclamation by the junta that seized power today, the factory groups were cited as a reason for the revolt.” The day before, an air force commando had attempted to raid the important Sumar textile factory, looking for arms. The workers, who have occupied the factory, successfully repulsed the soldiers with gunfire and the commando was eventually forced to retreat as reinforcements from surrounding plants arrived (*Le Monde*, 11 September 1973). The air force had carried out similar raids twice during August, apparently trying to provoke a shootout with the workers. This time they lost – and that was perhaps the last straw; it was high time to get rid of Allende. Brought to power in order to control the labor movement, he lost his usefulness as he increasingly proved unable to discipline the workers. And with a flick of its finger, the bourgeoisie toppled him.

That the coup was not simply the work of the fascists and ultra-reactionaries is shown by several facts: in addition to Admiral José Toribia merino, a sympathizer of *Patria y Libertad*¹⁸, the junta also includes Army commander General Augusto Pinochet, a leading “constitutionalist.” Moreover, the whole recent chain of events was triggered by the resignation of General Carlos Prats on August 23. General Prats, the leading “constitutionalist” and Minister of Defense,

¹⁸ *Patria y Libertad* was a fascist terror group funded by the CIA.

stepped down in order, as he put it, “to preserve the unity of the institution” (the military). He was followed by two other military ministers. These resignations represented a vote of no confidence in the government by all wings of the general staff of the armed forces. From that time on, the coup was simply a question of timing and personnel.

Nor was it simply a military matter. The atmosphere for the military takeover was provided by the economic chaos resulting from the truck owners’, shopkeepers’ and professionals’ work stoppage which had continued for more than a month and a half. This was clearly a political effort designed to bring down the government, as was the similar work stoppage last year [1972]. The truck owners’ confederation is closely tied to the National Party, while most of the other professional associations are linked to the Christian Democrats. Both in November [1972] and August of this year the CDP directly called on its professional associations to join the counterrevolutionary action. Thus while its leaders in parliament talked soothingly of waiting until the 1976 elections, the Christian Democratic Party was preparing the coup along with every other sector of the bourgeoisie.

The “Revolutionary” Left

As the masses of Chilean workers and peasants have become progressively disillusioned with the reformist CP and SP they have begun searching for an alternative leadership. Many have joined the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* [MIR – Revolutionary left Movement], the most important group to the left of the UP. The MIR is a New Left-Castroite group which until 1970 concentrated largely on organizing peasants for land takeovers and guerrilla warfare. After taking an ultra-left line by abstaining from the 1970 election on principle, the MIR suddenly flip-flopped and issued a statement immediately after the election giving Allende critical support. It continued to call for support to the UP in one form or another until the very end: “The Revolutionary left Movement maintains that although we do not agree with every step of the Popular Unity, that although we have differences with aspects of its policies, this does not signify that we come to a definitive break with the Popular Unity” (*Punto Final*, 9 November 1971). But it precisely is a “definitive break” that is called for. Here we have a government tied to a section of the bourgeoisie, whose main task is to hold the workers back from revolution – and the MIR gives it critical support! By this act of class betrayal it must take a major responsibility for the coup.

Furthermore, the MIR failed to raise as a key demand throughout this period the arming of the workers and the formation of workers militias based on the unions (and *cordones industriales*).¹⁹ Instead, MIR documents speak only in the most general terms of the limits of peaceful reforms and of the need to “accumulate power to crush any seditious attempt or the civil war which the exploiters will attempt” (*El Rebelde*, 23-30 May 1973). The main activity of the organization has been land and factory takeovers which, however militant they may be, failed to take on the question of the Allende government.

Chile and the American Left

Thus among the major socialist organizations in Chile, there is none that called for the replacement of the popular-front regime with a workers government, i.e., called for the working class to break from the bourgeoisie; they instead capitulated to the UP government’s (initial) tremendous popularity among the working masses. In the U.S., of all the ostensibly Trotskyist organizations the only one to take a clear stand against the UP government was the Spartacist League. Immediately after the 1970 elections we wrote:

“It is the most elementary duty for revolutionary Marxists to irreconcilably oppose the Popular Front in the election and to place absolutely no confidence in it in power. Any ‘critical support’ to the Allende coalition is class treason, paving the way for a bloody defeat for the Chilean working people when domestic reaction, abetted by international imperialism, is ready.

–*Spartacist*, November-December 1970

By way of contrast, the opportunist Workers League wrote that “the workers must hold Allende to his promises ...” (*Bulletin*, 21 September 1970) while the ex-Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party’s initial evaluation of the Allende election (*Intercontinental Press*, 5 October 1970) amounted to de facto critical support: “... failing to recognize the positive elements in it, condemning it in toto out of some sectarian dogmatism, would mean suicidal isolation.” It would certainly have meant isolation in the early months of the Popular unity government. But the principled Trotsky-

ist position of unswerving opposition to the popular front was in fact *the only alternative to suicide*. It was *support* for Allende that led to the present counterrevolutionary coup.

A slogan cannot be applied mechanically in all situations. Thus at the time of the June 29 coup and during late August the SL called for “a united front of all workers organizations to smash the rightist-militarist offensive in Chile, *while continuing to struggle for the overthrow of the popular-front government of ‘socialists’ and generals by proletarian revolution*” (“Showdown in Chile,” 4 September 1973). Today, Marxists must struggle to smash the junta by a workers’ uprising. To call for support to the UP is to reaffirm a policy whose suicidal nature is being demonstrated at this very moment! In a similar situation, when faced with the attempt in August 1917 by General Kornilov to overthrow the Kerensky government and crush the revolutionary workers of Petrograd, the Bolsheviks called for a united front of all workers organizations to smash the counterrevolutionary conspirators and even fought alongside the troops of the bourgeois Kerensky government. “*Even now* we must not support Kerensky’s government,” wrote Lenin:

“We shall fight, we are fighting against Kornilov, just as Kerensky’s troops do, but we do not support Kerensky. On the contrary we expose his weakness. There is the difference. It is a rather subtle difference, but it is highly essential and must not be forgotten.”

–“To the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P.” (30 August 1917)

But of course in the Chilean situation it would be manifestly absurd to call for even military support to the UP government, which has already been smashed.

Similarly to call on all “democrats” to defend civil liberties is to fail to understand the nature of the present coup. The junta will undoubtedly suppress civil liberties, even for the bourgeois parties, for a certain time. But its fundamental job is to crush the workers movement and it, in turn, can only be destroyed by a proletarian offensive.

Never have the lines between revolutionary Marxism and opportunism been clearer. They are drawn in blood, the coin in which betrayals are paid.

¹⁹ According to its guerrillaist conceptions, the MIR did not call for generalized armed resistance to the coup by the working class but instead conferred this task on select groups acting separately from the workers movement. Thus while it did attempt some resistance, the MIR did not prepare workers of the *cordones industriales* for mass resistance to the coup. Instead it withdrew to carry out guerrilla struggle, which was soon crushed. MIR leader Miguel Enriquez was killed in combat a year later.

Reply to Our Critics

No “Critical Support” to Popular Frontism

The following article is reprinted from Spartacist Nos. 27-28, Winter 1979-80. (Some additional explanatory footnotes have been added.)

At the first delegated conference of the international Spartacist tendency in 1979 a discussion was held on the question of revolutionary electoral policy toward workers parties participating in popular front coalitions. Below are edited presentations and summaries given by Comrades Jan Norden and James Robertson.

Presentation by Norden:

Comrades, the question of the electoral policy of Bolsheviks toward the popular front has been presented by the United Secretariat²⁰ as simply a tactical question, and we have become known over the last period for our position that this is a central, strategic question especially in this period.

There’s a quotation from a letter by Trotsky to the Dutch section saying that the popular front “is the main question for proletarian class strategy for this epoch” and “the best criterion for the difference between Bolshevism and Menshevism” [“The Dutch Section and the International,” in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1935-36)*]. As you’ll notice, different passages from this quote keep reappearing in our press. I’d like to just mention tonight two other things that are in the same key quotation. One is that Trotsky takes on not only those who directly support the popular front but also those who “present this question as a tactical or even as a technical maneuver, so as to be able to peddle their wares in the shadow of the Popular Front.” And second is that he presents as “the greatest historical example of the Popular Front” Russia in 1917, from February to October. That’s where to look for the Bolshevik precedent on this question.

Now, we have very little time, so I would like to concentrate on the essentials. And the main point I

think we have to make here is that giving electoral support to the so-called “workers parties of the popular front” is, in fact, the policy of critical support – so-called “critical support” – to popular fronts coming from reformists and centrists who make claim to the tradition of Trotskyism. In other words, they want to give “critical support” to the popular front without openly, directly and demonstrably crossing the class line, so they give “critical support” to the workers parties of the popular front. In effect, this policy calls on the workers to put a *bourgeois* political formation into office. It calls for votes to the mass parties of the popular front. In many cases, as much as 95 percent of all the votes for the popular front in fact go to the workers parties of the popular front. This was the case in Chile in 1970, also in France in the early 1970s, and classically in Spain where Trotsky was constantly referring to the bourgeois component of the People’s Front as the “shadow of the bourgeoisie.” And, as Trotsky said about the popular-frontist policy of the POUM, “There can be no greater crime than coalition with the bourgeoisie in a period of socialist revolution.” [“No Greater Crime,” in Leon Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution (1931-39)*].

Now, in order to justify this policy, opportunists frequently use many sophisticated arguments essentially to deny that the popular front is, in fact, a bourgeois political formation. The Mandelites denied that the French Union of the Left, or the Chilean Unidad Popular government headed by Allende, was a popular front in order to carry out their policy of voting for the workers parties of the popular front. Another argument used is that a popular front is essentially the same as a social-democratic labor party in power, especially in an imperialist country. By glossing over the capitalist class character of the popular front they, in effect, tell the workers: “Look, these people are part of our class and you can demand of them anything. They, of course, are betrayers and will attempt to deny the just demands of the workers, but it is historically possible for them to go beyond the limits of capitalism to crush

²⁰ The United Secretariat (USec) of the Fourth International, led by Ernest Mandel, claimed to be the continuity of Trotsky’s Fourth International, but politically followed the liquidationist course of Michel Pablo, who abandoned Trotskyism in the early 1950s, tailing after various reformist and petty-bourgeois forces, ordering sections of the FI to bury themselves in the Stalinist Communist parties (and secondarily Social Democratic parties). This led to a split in the Fourth International in 1951-53 between Pabloists and defenders of orthodox Trotskyism led by James P. Cannon of the American Socialist Workers Party, as well as Pierre Lambert in France and Gerry Healy in Britain. Mandel and his followers continued Pablo’s course, tailing after the Algerian FLN, Fidel Castro’s Cuban CP, guerrilla groups inspired by Che Guevara in Latin America, the student-youth Red Guards in Mao’s China, etc.

fascism and stop imperialist war and so on.” Now this is the argument that is used. But in fact the popular front, because it is a bourgeois formation, because its program must necessarily be that of the most so-called “moderate” elements who are the bourgeois components of the popular front, cannot go beyond the bounds of capitalism. And by helping to place the popular front in power, those who give electoral support to its candidates share responsibility for setting up a roadblock to revolution and fostering the victory of reaction. So for us it is a central question and not simply a tactical maneuver of a secondary order.

This has been a constant difference between us and the United Secretariat and various centrists over the past years. But it has become particularly important again in light of the prospect of a unification between the international Spartacist tendency and the Revolutionary Workers Party (RWP) of Sri Lanka. In this projected unification certainly the clearest outstanding and currently expressed area of difference is precisely over whether it is principled and correct to give electoral support to *any* party of the popular front, which is as we see this question. Comrade Robertson wrote in his letter to Comrade Samarakkody²¹ expressing the central importance of raising class criteria and not simply “progressive vs. reactionary” criteria. And in the supplementary letter by myself and Comrade Sharpe we stressed the central importance for Trotskyists that any electoral tactic must express the fundamental Marxist principle of the political independence of the proletariat. So, I don’t want to go back to those points, I want to make a couple of other observations.

The first one is about Russia in 1917. Frequently, the example of the Bolshevik slogan of “Down with the ten capitalist ministers” is raised by those who argue for electoral support to the bourgeois workers parties participating in a popular front. And this is also the case with the RWP and I think that frequently this is seen as an argument against us because of a misunderstanding – or, as it may be, a willful misinterpretation – of what we mean when we say that in a popular front the contradiction within the bourgeois workers parties has been suppressed. In the late 1930s then-comrade Shachtman²² wrote an article on the Spanish elections

in which he put our view of this quite clearly. He said when the workers parties joined the popular front, “politically speaking, they appeared before the masses in *one party* with the bourgeoisie” [“The Spanish Elections and the People’s Front,” *New Militant*, 14 March 1936). And he underlined that and stressed it. The demand of the Bolsheviks in 1917 was that *if* the Mensheviks broke and the Left SRs broke from their bourgeois allies in the Provisional Government and from the officer corps and formed a government based on the Soviet, *then* they would support them against reaction – but *only* then. And that is exactly what our policy of conditional opposition to these reformist and centrist parties in a popular front consists of: it’s saying that *if you* break with the popular front, *then* we can consider a policy of critical support to your candidate, but not until.

Now, the second observation is that this was not a constant policy of the Bolsheviks. From July until late August they did not raise this policy at a time when the Mensheviks and Kerensky were placing themselves at the spearhead of reaction and reactionary repression.²³ [Nor did the Bolsheviks use this tactic after they obtained a majority in the Petrograd Soviet, from mid-September 1917 on.]. As one comrade said, “When the communists have a majority in the working population or in the Soviets, we are unconditionally opposed to electoral coalitionism with anybody.”

The third observation is this, comrades: when you go up to the ballot box or tell workers what to do at the ballot box, it is not simply an electoral question. A government is going to come out of that. And a bourgeois popular-front government at a time of working-class upsurge is a ticket for fascism, it’s a ticket for imperialist war. If you haven’t warned the workers in advance that this is what electing that popular front is going to mean, you’re complicit in what follows. The key task of the Marxists is to prepare the proletariat so it can resist false friends and see who its true enemies are.

Now Russia in 1917 was not a case of bourgeois parliamentarism, but [the question of coalitionism, of popular frontism, was a central question nonetheless. And] if the Bolsheviks had flinched – well, they did

²¹ Edmund Samarakkody was a longtime Trotskyist in Sri Lanka (the former British colony of Ceylon) and head of the RWP.

²² Max Shachtman broke from the Trotskyist movement in 1939-40, denying that the Soviet Union was a bureaucratically degenerated workers state and refusing to defend it against the onslaught of German imperialism in World War II. From being a fine Trotskyist polemicist in the 1930s,

Shachtman went over to eventually embracing U.S. imperialism during the Korean War (1950-53).

²³ As Trotsky wrote, “The slogan ‘Power to the Soviets’ from now on meant armed insurrection against the government and those military cliques which stood behind it. But to raise an insurrection in the cause of ‘Power to the Soviets’ when the soviets did not want the power, was obvious nonsense” (Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Vol. 2, Ch. 13, “The Bolsheviks and the Soviets”).

flinch, actually, once they did and the second time they almost did – but if that had been the dominant policy there would have been no October Revolution.²⁴

OK, two other quick points. People frequently say that in the 1930s the Trotskyists did not have our policies in France. Undoubtedly this will come up in the discussion period. But I would like to call attention to the way Trotsky formulated the question in 1921 in his messages to the French party [see “On the United Front,” in Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Comintern*, Vol. 2]. He said that *if* – again, he presented it as a precondition – the Dissidents agreed to break the Left Bloc with the bourgeoisie, then we can talk about united-front tactics with the Communist Party. But only in that circumstance.

And then finally, on the RWP explicitly: what we find most disturbing and potentially an opening in your own views is the contradiction between your policy or your stated policy of wanting to give electoral support to the workers parties of the popular front on the one hand, and on the other hand taking the necessary step for any Bolshevik of voting against the bourgeois popular-front government. Now there may be questions of tactics but the vote to bring down the Bandaranaike²⁵ coalition government in 1964 was obligatory for any true Bolshevik or Trotskyist. And we find that courageous act one which we stand on, which we have claimed as our own in some of the documents preparing for this conference. We find that act in contradiction to your present stated views, or the ones in your last letter on the subject.

²⁴ Before Lenin returned to Russia in April, *Pravda* under the direction of Kamenev and Stalin adopted a policy of conditional support to the Lvov coalition government (the notorious support “insofar as...”). Lenin had to wage a sharp struggle against that policy, which he regarded as a principled difference. And in October, Zinoviev and Kamenev opposed taking power without a coalition with the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, who however were tied to a “popular front” with Kerensky, Kornilov and the Cadets [Constitutional Democrats]. Again Lenin threatened split. Far from giving *any* political support, however critical, to the coalition, Lenin’s strategy from April until the October insurrection was precisely to struggle for the *overthrow of the popular front by the soviets*.

²⁵ Sirimavo Bandaranaike headed a coalition government of her own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the ex-Trotskyist Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP), from which Samarakkody had earlier broken as it went over to popular-frontism with the SLFP, a party characterized by virulent chauvinism of the dominant Sinhala population against the Tamil minority. The split-off was first called the LSSP-Revolutionary (LSSP-R) and later, following a split with USec supporters, the RWP.

Presentation by Robertson:

In 1966, on behalf of the Spartacist League of the United States, I sought to make a statement to an international conference [the London Conference of Healy’s International Committee²⁶], a statement comparable in unpopularity to that which Comrade Edmund just made. (laughter) We trust that the sequel will be qualitatively different. (laughter) Now would be an appropriate time to reveal the secret codicil to the articles of agreement that were worked out in Sri Lanka a couple of months ago. We agreed to turn over to the RWP the names of our opportunists if they gave us the names of their sectarians. (laughter)

Now, my remarks are subsumed generally under the title, as I put it down, of “Electoral Coalitionism and the Communists.” I first want to touch on a point that needs to be hammered out in the incoming International Executive Committee, but I’d certainly like to sketch a view in a sentence or two. As is perfectly clear to everyone who heard Comrade Samarakkody, in every subjective sense [he expressed] intense hostility and opposition to the popular front governments in Sri Lanka. The point at issue really revolves around the relationship of the LSSP-R, now the RWP, and the LSSP. It was expressly put that the reason that the RWP, in about 1972, came to regret their vote that assisted in bringing down the popular-front government was because they wanted at that time to make a renewed overture to the LSSP.

Now, in a certain sense, the experience of popular frontism was chemically pure in Sri Lanka in a way that it has not been in Chile, Spain or France. Because the popular front in Sri Lanka had a chance to run on and on and on and dissipate itself with its own momentum without being displaced by counterrevolutionary generals or internal or foreign fascists. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party is, at least for the present, discredited, but the Communist Party is badly damaged,

²⁶ Gerry Healy opposed the 1963 regroupment of the American SWP with Mandel’s International Secretariat in Europe which gave rise to the United Secretariat on the basis of political support Castro’s variant of Stalinism. The Revolutionary Tendency of the SWP, forerunner of the Spartacist League, called for military defense but no political support to the Cuban *bureaucratically deformed* workers state and opposed reunification with the Mandelites. After a period of discussions with Healy and his followers in the U.S., a split occurred at the 1966 London Conference called by Healy, where he summarily expelled the Spartacist delegation for daring to disagree with him on issues such as the nature of Castro’s Cuba (which the Healyites considered to be a bourgeois state) and the black question in the United States.

and the LSSP is a corpse – it is dead! Its trade-union base is disintegrated, it has lost its youth, its women, the Tamils hate it as a chauvinist party of a master nation. And the LSSP-R, now the RWP, tied themselves to the LSSP – which is a corpse – and they are seen as a left-wing split from the LSSP but still within its orbit – part of the old boys of the LSSP – the best of a bad lot. Where have the subjectively revolutionary elements of Sri Lanka gone? I have to report that in Ceylon where the Trotskyists used to be preponderant over the Stalinists, the Stalinists have for the present won. The Mao-influenced youth of the Stalinist parties broke away and were the founding cadres of the JVP [Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna – People’s Liberation Front]. Now, “we know that the JVP are just popular frontists with a gun, very much like the [Castroite] MIRistas in Chile. But they happen to include something like 20,000 of the youth and the young women that are Ceylonese militants, subjectively more or less revolutionary. There are no youth, women or Tamils hanging about the stench of death of the LSSP. The JVP has the reputation in Sri Lanka of intransigent opposition to the popular front. They have 20,000 members, the RWP has 20 members, and no women or Tamils. This is a question to be pursued in the International Executive.

There is nothing special, inventive or unusually Marxistically creative about the position advanced by the iSt [international Spartacist tendency]. We’re simply trying to apply the developed Bolshevik experience, especially as expressed in the period from February to October 1917, in the modern movement. And not even as late as 1917; basically it goes back to Luxemburg’s writings on coalitionism in the Second International at the turn of the century. To be sure, the American Socialist Workers Party likes to point out that coalitionism is not popular frontism, unless the Stalinists are present in the coalition. Around about 1905 you’ll find a very partial position by Lenin, when the Bolsheviks were still struggling for a united workers party in Russia. The later, anti-comrade Shachtman was fond of quoting one of these positions: “Oh, where the Bolsheviks are in the majority we will oppose the Cadet Party. Where the Mensheviks are in the majority the Bolsheviks will loyally support the Cadet members of the Duma.”²⁷ This, along with the organ-

²⁷ In 1957 Shachtman was preparing to liquidate his Independent Socialist League into the American social democracy. To rationalize joining a party that supported the Democrats he pointed out that in 1906 Lenin favored maintaining unity with the Mensheviks, even though the Mensheviks wanted to bloc with the bourgeois Cadets in the elections to the Second State Duma. In the article quoted by Shachtman,

izational question and others, indicates that the evolution of the Bolshevik faction of revolutionary social democrats into the Bolshevik Party of communists was a process over a decade.

And as my last sentence, let me frighten you with a thought I just had. If, in fact, we did not have this position that we do on opposition to popular fronts and any electoral support to any wing of a popular front, I think that we would belong in the left wing of the Mandelbrot USec majority [of their 2-1/2 International]. But we’re serious people and intend to carry out the logic of our position.

Summary by Norden:

The comrades of the RWP or more precisely Comrade Samarakkody in his letters to the Spartacist League that we printed in our internal bulletin said that a popular front is a two-class government. There are no two-class governments. As Trotsky said, “A horseman is not a bloc between a horse and a man.” One class commands, and in the popular front that’s the bourgeoisie. Secondly, for those who are sincere opponents of popular frontism, electoral support to the workers parties of popular fronts is not a tactic. It is tailism masquerading as a tactic.

Trotsky had a nice phrase about tactics. He said, “It’s not enough to possess the sword. One must give it an edge. It’s not enough to give the sword an edge. One must know how to wield it” [“On the United Front”]. The tactic must exploit the contradiction. So the centrists say to the workers parties of the popular front: “Break with the bourgeoisie! Break with the harbingers of fascism and imperialist war! If you do, we will support you and if you don’t we’ll support you anyway!” That’s not a tactic! We’re for tactics.

A comrade mentioned that in the 1936 French parliamentary elections [one of the two French groups which claimed allegiance to the movement for the Fourth International] maintained a Trotskyist candi-

“Party Discipline and the Fight Against the Pro-Cadet Social-Democrats” (*Collected Works*, Vol. 11), Lenin stated that “The sanction of blocs with the Cadets is the finishing touch that definitely marks the Mensheviks as the opportunist wing of the workers’ party.” Lenin called for “the widest and most relentless ideological struggle” against “these shameful tactics of blocs with the Cadets.” However, added Lenin, if the Menshevik position should become the party line, “all of us, as members of the Party, must act as one man. A Bolshevik in Odessa must cast into the ballot box a ballot paper bearing a Cadet’s name even if it sickens him. And a Menshevik in Moscow must cast into the ballot box a ballot paper bearing only the names of Social-Democrats, even if his soul is yearning for the Cadets.”

date in a district where the CP or SP candidate stepped down in favor of a Radical. That's a conceivable tactic. But that does not necessarily imply critical support to the workers parties of the popular front. In fact, in 1935 the position of the French Trotskyists was precisely that. They called for running candidates in those circumstances, and they did not give critical support to any of the parties of the popular front. It was in the '35 municipal elections.²⁸

We look for ways of presenting our opposition to popular frontism in a way that could give it a tactical leverage. So that in a Canadian election at some time or other, we first formulated the tactic of conditional opposition.²⁹ We were so energetic about it that we went looking for some NDP legislator up in Thunder Bay, Canada, to see if he was ready to vote against the coalition.

Our tactics must express our strategy. Our strategy is opposition to popular-frontism. One comrade asked a good rhetorical question: "What do you do when there's only *one* candidate of the popular front? You can't even distinguish between the workers candidates of the popular front and the bourgeois candidates, because they're *one*."³⁰ Also, in parliament you can't

²⁸ The second half of their "electoral" policy was for a workers mobilization on voting day to disperse a scheduled reactionary demonstration (*La Vérité*, 10 May 1935).

²⁹ In 1974, when the social-democratic New Democratic Party was running in a corridor coalition with the Liberals, we wrote: "The Spartacist League urges a policy of conditional opposition to the NDP in the current elections until such time as the NDP repudiates its past practice of entering into a tacit coalition with the Liberals.... Militants in the Canadian trade unions must take up the fight to pass motions in their locals demanding that the NDP repudiate its past practice of coalitionism as a condition for labor support in the elections. Only those NDP candidates who repudiate and promise to vote against the NDP-Liberal 'corridor coalition' should be given labor support in the current election. While the NDP remains dependent upon the unions for both electoral and financial support, its practice of coalitionism undercuts the very principle of independent working-class political action" (see "NDP Must Break With Liberals," *Workers Vanguard* No. 47, 21 June 1974).

³⁰ That was the situation in the February 1936 elections in Spain where the Popular Front presented a single slate, and also when Allende ran for Chilean president in 1970 and Mitterrand for French president in 1974. The response of the partisans of voting for the workers parties of the popular front is to invent phony distinctions. In the 1974 French vote, the OCI (Organisation Communiste Internationaliste of Pierre Lambert) called for a vote not to Mitterrand, candidate of the Union of the Left, but to Mitterrand, first secretary of the Socialist Party, a workers organization. However, the SP had removed him as first secretary precisely in order

vote for the motion of the workers parties of the popular front because there's only one motion: the motion of the government, and it's the government of the popular front – for or against.

That's the way it is in reality. Because what the masses face in their everyday struggle is a popular front. It's a bourgeois government, not a hydra.

Another common objection to our policy of proletarian opposition to the popular front is the charge of aiding the right. But until you're prepared to overthrow the existing government, *any* kind of opposition to a popular front in office will be open to the attack that it is aiding the right. Think of the May Days in Barcelona.

Now I want to say something about a little historical research I've been doing, and that is the question of the popular front in the 1930s. The French GBL (Groupe Bolchevik-Léniniste) had the position of supporting the social democrats or Stalinists in those districts where it didn't run its own candidates in the 1936 elections. To some extent that was taken as a precedent later, after World War II. It's not the only precedent in the history of the Trotskyist movement by a long shot. In 1942 the Chilean POR (Partido Obrero Revolucionario) ran a candidate for president against the popular front. And in 1948 the Italian Trotskyists opposed any vote to the popular front, but they were criticized by Pablo.

So what was the situation in 1936? First of all, nobody paid any attention to this question at all. In the internal bulletin of the French GBL there is one sentence on its policy in the election – and two pages of discussion in a later bulletin – compared to more than a hundred pages on the split with the Molinier³¹ group. Nor was the GBL policy mentioned in any of the post-June 1936 issues of *Lutte Ouvrière*. It was not a big issue. I'm not even sure Trotsky knew what the GBL policy was; he might have, but it's not clear. I was looking through the [Trotsky] archives [at Harvard University], and Trotsky writes big notes over everything putting triple exclamation points every time Vereecken opens his mouth. But here there's no marks at all on his copy [of the GBL internal bulletin referring to electoral policy].

Now, why is that? The reason is that the real policy of the French Trotskyists – and the essential policy of Trotsky at that time – was, "Not the Popular Front

to make this long-time former bourgeois politician more acceptable as candidate of the popular front.

³¹ Raymond Molinier was a cofounder of the French section of the Trotskyist movement, from which we was expelled in December 1935 for launching his own short-lived "mass paper," *La Commune*.

But Committees of Action!” Here’s what the Central Committee said to somebody who wanted to vote for all of the popular front candidates: “You have to understand the totality of our position. We must explain to the proletarians that their fate will not be played out on the parliamentary terrain. We call on them to struggle for the revolution on another terrain. And that’s why the electoral questions have an absolutely secondary aspect” [GBL, *Bulletin Intérieur* No. 14, 24 April 1936]. Trotsky thought there was going to be a revolution – “The French Revolution Has Begun,” remember? And his policy was “Soviets Everywhere” – that was what the first issue of their paper said in June 1936. And that’s what the French Trotskyists did – they came out, and their main policy was “No to Electoral Cretinism”; you can’t smash the fascists in parliament, you have to have workers militias. And they went out and formed workers militias. That’s what their real policy was.

Secondly, I think there’s an explanation for why they had what we consider a wrong policy, that is, calling for votes for the workers parties of the popular front. In France all three factions of the French party were soft on the Socialist Party – which they had been in and didn’t want to leave [and that influenced their policy toward the popular front³²]. Immediately after the popular front was formed in May of 1935 Trotsky sent a letter to the International Secretariat arguing that After the Stalin-Laval pact the Bolshevik-Leninists could no longer remain in the SFIO and had to prepare for independent existence [“A New Turn Is Necessary,” in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1934-35)*]. Molinier said it would be a crime to leave the Socialist Party, But all three factions in the French party were begging to be let back into the Socialist Party after they were expelled. It took them six months to even pass a resolution for an aggressive policy toward the Socialist Party.³³ So that is the context, it’s not just Molinier who had a soft position on the popular front – but all the factions of the French party did.

I want to emphasize what this leads to. It’s Spain. One of the things that struck me in my research was how everything in the French, Belgian and American Trotskyist papers throughout 1936-37 is about Spain. There’s almost nothing about France in the French papers after June 1936. And every faction in the

³² For example, the 2 November 1934 *La Vérité* had a front-page headline, “Popular Front? Yes, But for Struggle.” Or again, following the municipal elections, “The Popular Front Must Act” (*La Vérité*, 31 May 1935).

³³ See Erwin Wolf’s “The Mass Paper” (a pamphlet written under the name Nicolle Braun, translated in Leon Trotsky, *The Crisis of the French Section [1935-36]*).

French party, plus Vereecken and Sneevliet, thought that Trotsky had a sectarian policy on Spain and that the International Secretariat had a criminally sectarian policy on Spain, because the I.S. called for an independent Bolshevik Party there and said that Nin’s policy of support to the popular front was a crime. Just about everyone else in Europe, except for the International Secretariat, thought that Trotsky was wrong. (Incidentally, Shachtman played a leading role in the International Secretariat during that period.) Trotsky had to call not only the Molinier group, but also his own supporters to order for publishing articles praising the POUM.³⁴ Vereecken said that the people who supported Trotsky’s position in Spain were a “gang of adventurers and careerists.”

There’s a logic to all of this: because their policy was one of critical support to the workers parties of the popular front, because they were soft on the popular front, they said, well, the POUM joined the popular front, unfortunately that was a mistake, but, you know, a mistake is not a crime. And it led to the following situation: In Spain in 1937 there were two Trotskyist groups – one that supported Trotsky and the International Secretariat, and another led by a Comrade Fosco that supported Molinier and Vereecken. During the May Days of 1937 the I.S. group published the famous leaflet that said “For a revolutionary government, take the power.” The Molinierist group didn’t publish a leaflet because they didn’t want to counterpose themselves to the POUM and the Popular Front. For they knew from talking to the POUM leaders that the POUM was going to call on the workers to withdraw because their insurrection threatened the popular-front government.³⁵ They gave “critical support” to the workers party of the popular front *by strikebreaking on a potential revolution*. That’s ultimately what it comes down to. So we’ve already had this experience. It’s not just the POUM – the open popular frontists who betray – but also centrists who try to reduce principled questions to mere tactics that can be led to support the worst betrayal.

Summary by Robertson:

There’s a problem in viewing the position of the iSt on popular fronts as Oehlerite³⁶; that is, when one

³⁴ E.g., *Lutte Ouvrière* of 15 August 1936 wrote that “Only the POUM of all the traditional parties is putting forward slogans commensurate with the situation and with a class content.”

³⁵ See Frank Mintz and Miguel Pecitla, *Los Amigos de Duruti, los trotsquistas y los sucesos de mayo* (Madrid, 1978).

³⁶ Hugo Oehler led an ultra-left faction that split from the U.S. Trotskyists in the mid-1930s, refusing on principle to

tries to be a rightist, one is thought, at least vulgarly, to be smarter than a leftist. Now there's a difficulty in taking the Second International as an abstraction. The Second International produced from 1917 to 1919 a rather creditable Communist International. Presumably one should have something to do with that before and during that time. But the Second International in the period of the 1920s was moribund, rightist and largely [openly] in the arms of the bourgeoisie. However, the Depression and the rise of fascism and the rightward turn of the Communist International precipitated a new leftist development in the Second International parties in the early 1930s. It is wrong to have an invariant tactic toward the Socialist Party through these three periods as some comrades would do. Not only is that indifferent to the question of revolutionary opportunity versus betrayal, it's not even intelligent.

Now, regarding the question of the JVP, the issue is one of how the JVP is seen, not what it is. The JVP is seen on that island as a militant, if insurrectionary opposition that means business. We compared it with the Chilean MIR which is, of course, no flattery to the JVP – they merely prepare a *new* version of a popular front. But on the evidence available to us, the LSSP-R – now the RWP – is only viewed as the far left – with a principled backbone – of the old LSSP. And the fact is that Trotskyism in Ceylon, which used to be predominant among the workers - is now bypassed by a factor of a thousandfold.

Comrade Norden did all this fine research on a very confused situation in the French section in the mid-30s. Faced with these complexities, I took a different route. The American Trotskyist organization was unsplit, a principal mouthpiece of Trotsky, and it operated under purely parliamentary conditions in that period. So I chose to use the American Trotskyists as the model for what Trotsky and the Fourth International meant [generally] in that time.

Popular frontism existed in the United States in the late 1930s in the form of the Roosevelt candidacy for president and the LaGuardia³⁷ candidacy for mayor of New York. In 1936 the labor bureaucrats, social democrats, Stalinists and bourgeois democrats invented a new workers party, the American Labor Party. It was created to bring a few hundred thousand crucial votes in New York State into the Democratic camp. Toward this experiment, and toward every candidacy of the

entering the Socialist Party on a short-term basis to win leftward-moving youth and worker militants.

³⁷ Fiorello LaGuardia, a Republican “populist,” was mayor of New York City from 1934 to 1945. In 1936 he ran on a “fusion” ticket, with the backing of the ALP, which in turn supported Democrat Roosevelt for president.

post-split SP and the CP, the Trotskyists had an implacable and central opposition in the name of opposition to the popular front and to every single party that supported the popular front. So much so that until that time the Trotskyists in the United States had largely ignored electoral politics. But faced with the popular-front issue, the SWP was pushed to running its own candidacies for the first time in order to underline its electoral opposition to popular frontism. And they were Trotsky's mouthpiece. ■

Trotsky on the Popular Front Not a Tactic But “The Greatest Crime”

“The question of questions at present is the People’s Front. The left centrists seek to present this question as a tactical or even as a technical maneuver, so as to be able to peddle their wares in the shadow of the People’s Front. In reality, the People’s Front is the *main question of proletarian class strategy* for this epoch. It also offers the best criterion for the difference between Bolshevism and Menshevism. For it is often forgotten that the greatest historical example of the People’s Front is the February 1917 revolution. From February to October, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, who represent a very good parallel to the ‘Communists’ and Social Democrats, were in the closest alliance and in a permanent coalition with the bourgeois party of the Cadets, together with whom they formed a series of coalition governments. Under the sign of this People’s Front stood the whole mass of the people, including the workers’, peasants’, and soldiers’ councils. To be sure, the Bolsheviks participated in the councils. But they did not make the slightest concession to the People’s Front. Their demand was to *break* this People’s Front, to destroy the alliance with the Cadets, and to create a genuine workers’ and peasants’ government.

“All the People’s Fronts in Europe are only a pale copy and often a caricature of the Russian People’s Front of 1917, which could after all lay claim to a much greater justification for its existence, for it was still a question of the struggle against czarism and the remnants of feudalism.” [emphasis in original]

–Leon Trotsky, “The Dutch Section and the International” (15-16 July 1936), in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1935-36)*

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“For the proletariat, through its parties, to give up its own independent program means to . give’ up its independent functioning as a class. And this is precisely the meaning of the People’s Front. In the People’s Front the proletariat renounces its *class* independence, gives up its *class* aims – the *only* aims, as Marxism teaches, which can serve its interests The People’s Front is thus thoroughly and irrevocably non-proletarian, anti-proletarian.

“By its very nature, the People’s Front must be so. The establishment of the People’s Front, by definition, requires agreement on a common program between the working-class and non-working-class parties. But the non-proletarian parties cannot agree to the proletarian program – the program of revolutionary socialism –

without ceasing to be what they are....

“The People’s Front, understood in its fundamentals, is the major form of the preparation among the masses for the achievement of national unity within the democratic nations in support of the coming war. Under the slogans of the People’s Front, the masses will march forth to fight for ‘their own’ imperialism....

“Thus, the People’s Front is the contemporary version of social-patriotism, the new form in which the betrayal of 1914 is to be repeated.” [emphasis in original]

–James Burnham, *The People’s Front: The New Betrayal* (1937)

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“26. Reformist-Dissidents are the agency of the ‘Left Bloc’ within the working class. Their success will be the greater, all the less the working class as a whole is seized by the idea and practice of the united front against the bourgeoisie. Layers of workers, disoriented by the war and by the tardiness of the revolution, may venture to support the ‘Left Bloc’ as a lesser evil, in the belief that they do not thereby risk anything at all, or because they see no other road at present.

“27. One of the most reliable methods of counteracting inside the working class the moods and ideas of the ‘Left Bloc,’ i.e., a bloc between the workers and a certain section of the bourgeoisie against another section of the bourgeoisie, is through promoting persistently and resolutely the idea of a *bloc between all the sections of the working class against the whole bourgeoisie*....

“31. The indicated method could be similarly employed and not without success in relation to parliamentary and municipal activities. We say to the masses, ‘The Dissidents, because they do not want the revolution, have split the mass of the workers. It would be insanity to count on their helping the proletarian revolution. But we are ready, inside and outside the parliament, to enter into certain practical agreements with them, provided they agree, in those cases where one must choose between the known interests of the bourgeoisie and the definite demands of the proletariat, to support the latter in action. The Dissidents can be capable of such actions only if they renounce their ties with the parties of the bourgeoisie, that is, the ‘Left Bloc’ and its bourgeois discipline.’

“If the Dissidents were capable of accepting these conditions, then their worker-followers would be quickly absorbed by the Communist Party. Just because of this, the Dissidents will not agree to these conditions. In other words, to the clearly and precisely

posed question whether they choose a bloc with the bourgeoisie or a bloc with the proletariat – in the concrete and specific conditions of mass struggle – they will be compelled to reply that they prefer a bloc with the bourgeoisie. Such an answer will not pass with impunity among the proletarian reserves on whom they are counting.” [emphasis in original]

–Leon Trotsky, “On the United Front” (2 March 1922), in *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol. 2

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“The job of the cartel [the “*cartel de la gauche*,” or “Left Bloc,” in France] always consisted in *putting a brake* upon the mass movement, directing it into the channels of class collaboration. This is precisely the job of the People’s Front as well. The difference between them – and not an unimportant one – is that the traditional cartel was applied during the comparatively peaceful and stable epochs of the parliamentary regime. Now, however, when the masses are impatient and explosive, a more imposing brake is needed, with the participation of the ‘Communists’....

“The coming parliamentary elections, no matter what their outcome, will not *in themselves* bring any serious changes into the situation: the voters, in the final analysis, are confronted with the choice between an arbiter of the type of Laval and an arbiter of the type of Herriot-Daladier. But inasmuch as Herriot has peacefully collaborated with Laval, and Daladier has supported them both, the difference between them is entirely insignificant, if measured by the scale of the tasks set by history.” [emphasis in original]

–Leon Trotsky, “France at the Turning Point” (28 March 1936), in *Leon Trotsky on France*

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“The July [1936] days [in Spain] deepen and supplement the lessons of the June days in France with exceptional force. For the second time in five years the coalition of the labor parties with the Radical bourgeoisie has brought the revolution to the edge of the abyss. Incapable of solving a single one of the tasks posed by the revolution – since all these tasks boil down to one, namely, the crushing of the bourgeoisie – the People’s Front renders the existence of the bourgeois regime impossible and thereby provokes the fascist coup d’état. By lulling the workers and peasants with parliamentary illusions, by paralyzing their will to struggle, the People’s Front creates favorable conditions for the victory of fascism. The policy of coalition with the bourgeoisie must be paid for by the proletariat with years of new torments and sacrifice, if not by decades of fascist terror.”

–Leon Trotsky, “The New Revolutionary Upsurge and the Tasks of the Fourth International” (July

1936), in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1933-1936)*

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“What was inexcusably criminal on the part of the [Spanish] Socialist party, the Communist party and the Maurin-Nin party of ‘Marxist Unification’ [the POUM] was not only that they wrote a ‘common program’ with the discredited bourgeois parties – which was bad enough – and that thereby, politically speaking, they appeared before the masses in *one party* with the bourgeoisie, but that this ‘common program’ was dictated and written by the bourgeoisie, and that in every other respect the joint party – under the pseudonym of the ‘People’s Front’ – was dominated by the bourgeoisie.” [emphasis in original]

–Max Shachtman, “The Spanish Elections and the People’s Front,” *New Militant*, 14 March 1936

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“In France the Popular Front took shape as the union on a reformist program of the working-class parties with the great ‘middle-class’ Radical-Socialist Party. There were no such parties in the United States, but the same social forces nevertheless operated under similar conditions, and the United States equivalent of the Popular Front was simply the New Deal Roosevelt Democratic Party.”

–“Editor’s Comments,” *New International*, December 1938

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“It is the specific question of LaFollette and LaGuardia. The movements backing them are not dreams, but the genuine, homespun authentic American type of ‘Farmer-Labor’ and ‘Labor’ Party. And what sort of movements are they? About this no elaborate argument is needed. Are they ‘anti-capitalist’? Not one of their leaders would dream of pretending so. They are dedicated heart and soul to the preservation of capitalism.... Are they ‘free of all entanglements with capitalist parties’...? How absurd: their chief task in 1936 was to gather votes for Roosevelt. Do they run genuine representatives of the proletariat for office? LaFollette and LaGuardia are the answer.

“The Farmer-Labor Progressive Federation and the American Labor Party are both vicious muddles of class collaboration, Popular Frontism, outworn Populism and atavistic liberalism, the docile instruments of labor bureaucrats and careerist ‘progressive’ capitalist politicians.

“Support of these movements at the present time in actuality represents the perspective of the liquidation of independent working-class politics. That is the long and short of it.”

–“A Manifesto to the Members of the Socialist Party,” *Socialist Appeal*, 14 August 1937

Letter to Samarakkody

by Jan Norden and John Sharpe
(excerpts)

—from international Spartacist tendency, *International Discussion Bulletin* No. 7, March 1977

New York
26 June 1974

Dear Comrade Samarakkody,

[The initial section of this document was a reply to criticisms of the international Spartacist tendency by Edmund Samarakkody, who was a longtime Trotskyist leader in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), concerning the iSt's attempts to seek discussions with the French Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI) of Pierre Lambert and the OCI's Organizing Committee for the Reconstruction of the Fourth International (OCRFI) during the early 1970s.]

The Role of Workers Parties in Popular Fronts

We fully agree with the other specific points of criticism of the OCI/OCRFI which you raise, in particular that,

“...the OCRFI clearly projects the concept of the development of revolutionary consciousness within the proletariat as an inevitable consequence of the unity of the working class.”

The “strategic united front” is but an extension of this conception. So, too, are the OCI's arguments justifying its call for a vote for the working-class parties of the popular front in the March 1973 French legislative elections and for the single candidate of the popular front (Mitterrand) on both rounds of the presidential elections this spring. In their election pamphlet (“Political resolution of the OCI,” 7 April 1974) we read:

“We are unconditionally in favor of the defeat of candidates of the bourgeois parties by a candidate of a workers party in these elections as in every other.” (our emphasis)

Evidently the OCI would have told the workers to vote for the CP/SP candidates of the popular front in the Spanish and French elections of 1936, or in Chile in 1970! Whatever their explanations for this policy, it can only be interpreted by the workers as meaning that the proletariat should seek to place in power, by giving electoral support (however critical, which in the case of the OCI is not very much), to a government including representatives of sections of the bourgeoisie. However, electing the popular-front coalitions of class collaboration is simply preparing the way for the bloody dictatorships of Franco, Petain and Pinochet!

It appears to us that there is a contradiction between your correct criticisms of the OCI for its perpetual tailing after the Stalinists and social democrats, and your (at least implicit) support for the tactical implementation of this line, namely voting for the CP and SP while they are running as part of the popular front. Although in a certain sense the OCI's support for Mitterrand on both rounds this spring is a logical extension of its policy in 1973, it could have preserved a fig leaf by running or supporting an independent candidate on the first round. But even had it done so, on the second round it still would have voted for the candidate of the popular front. What would your own policy have been in these recent elections?

You criticize our view that participation in a popular-front coalition suppresses the contradictions inherent in the reformist workers parties -- that is between their subordination to the interests of capitalism and their claim, implicit or explicit, to represent the interests of the working class and/or base themselves on organized labor. If this contradiction were suppressed, you argue, then it would have no meaning for revolutionaries to call on the reformists to break with the bourgeoisie and take power in their own hands, as Lenin demanded in late August of 1917.

We do, of course, call on the French CP and SP to break from the Union of the Left and run on their own, just as we did in the context of the Allende coalition in Chile. But this in no sense contradicts the view that in a popular front the dual character of the reformist workers parties is suppressed. Your argument appears to rest on the equation of “suppressed” with “eliminated.” Clearly, the class contradictions in (to use Lenin's expression) the “bourgeois workers parties” continue to exist even though they formally tie themselves to a section of the bourgeoisie and a program of government which maintains capitalism. But that contradiction is, at least temporarily *suppressed* in favor of the dominant bourgeois element; the contradiction is inoperative....

Your basic argument in favor of giving (in some circumstances) critical support to the workers parties of a popular front appears to be that this coalitionism is nothing more than the expression of the class-collaborationist policies constantly advocated by the reformists. If we can give them critical support when they run independently, if we can advocate the election of a Labour Party government in Britain which we

know will function faithfully as the executive committee of the bourgeoisie, then what is the fundamental difference which prevents us from advocating votes for their candidates when they merely give a concrete expression to their pro-capitalist politics, in the form of the popular front? The programs of such coalitions are often identical to the immediate (minimum) program of the Communist and Socialist parties, and in any case we take no political responsibility for such counterrevolutionary parties.

A popular front is defined not simply by its program, but above all by the class forces which compose it, and the fact that it is an ongoing political bloc in which the full freedom of criticism, to raise revolutionary politics aimed at overthrowing capitalism, is suppressed. We believe you give insufficient weight to the fact that the purpose of the tactic of critical support is to play upon and use to the Marxists' advantage the contradictions inherent in the reformist ("bourgeois") workers parties. The existence of, and a vote for, the mass socialdemocratic, labor and Stalinist parties represent a step toward independent political action against the class enemy, if only by their organizational independence from the capitalist parties. At least in an elemental way this draws a class line. Advocating a vote for these parties, while raising demands on them which generalize the principle of working-class independence into a struggle against capitalism, enables revolutionary Marxists to show in practice to the workers how the reformists' real program is support for capitalism. By the same token, the formation of and votes for a political bloc with a section of the bourgeoisie represent a step away from this basic principle of Marxist politics.

As Engels remarked at the 1871 London Conference of the First International:

"We want the abolition of classes. What is the means of achieving it? The only means is political domination of the proletariat.... However, our politics must be workingclass politics. The workers' party must never be the tagtail of any bourgeois party; it must be independent and have its goal and its own policy."

—"Apropos of Working-Class Political Action"

This was subsequently written into the rules of the International Workingmen's Association:

"Article 7a. In its struggle against the collective power of the possessing classes the proletariat can act as a class only by constituting itself a distinct political party, opposed to all the old parties formed by the possessing classes."

—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Resolution on the Rules" (1872)

And this is precisely what the popular front negates — the principle of proletarian independence from the class enemy. Thus critical support for workers parties in a popular front means voting for the reformists not only when they take a step in the direction of proletarian democracy, but also when they take a step in the direction of the bourgeoisie. In that sense it is a logical expression of the "strategic united front," and of its derivative principle that revolutionists should "unconditionally" favor a workers party against the bourgeois party in "every" election.

There are a number of additional arguments for this position which should be mentioned. First, there is the OCI hocus-pocus that in voting for Mitterrand it is voting not for the candidate of the Union of the Left, but rather for the "First Secretary of the Socialist Party." If these two candidates were counterposed then we could consider giving critical electoral support to the latter against the former. But, alas, they are one and the same, and the OCI's distinction vanishes into thin air. A second common argument (raised by the FCR³⁸) is that the working class has illusions in the popular front; by putting it in power we will enable the masses to see what are the real policies of the Union of the Left. In short, we must "go through the experience of the popular front" together with the workers, not isolated from them. This argument misses the point that there are experiences we do not want to go through with the workers, namely those which stand opposed to the principle of working-class independence. If they support an imperialist war or a bourgeois party, this would certainly not cause revolutionists to vote war credits to the government or to advocate critical support to the SLFP or the U.S. Democrats (despite the fact that a good number of workers certainly support the Democrats and the Bandaranaike outfit).

Thirdly, it is often maintained (as by the OCI in the recent French elections) that a popular-front government would set the stage for a sharpening of the class struggle. This is a revealing argument, for it would hold good for voting for the bourgeois as well as the workers parties of a popular front. In any case, while popular fronts frequently come to power in a situation of working-class upsurge they represent not an expression of this unrest but rather a fundamental barrier to its generalization, a self-defense measure for the bourgeoisie and a formal commitment by the reformists not to transcend the bounds of capitalism.

³⁸ The Front Communiste Révolutionnaire replaced the Ligue Communiste after the latter was banned by the French government in 1973 and is today the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, French section of the USec, followers of the politics of the late Ernest Mandel.

You do not raise such opportunist arguments and have expressed sharp opposition to the coalitionist policies of the LSSP and CP in Ceylon. (However, we do not know what your policy was in the 1970 Ceylonese elections.) But how can we explain to the workers that communists oppose in principle giving any political support to the parties of the bourgeoisie if we are calling on the workers to place in power a popular-front government? How could Chilean Marxists explain to the working masses, who are paying with their blood the consequences of a popular-front government, that revolutionists should have voted for Allende in 1970? Can we tell Ceylonese workers that they should have voted for the LSSP or CP in the last elections so that [LSSP leader] Perera and [Communist Party leader] Keuneman could place Bandaranaike in power -- to prepare the JVP massacre of 1971 and now perhaps a military coup?

Perhaps the nub of your call for a vote to the CP and SP in last year's French elections may rest in failing to recognize the existence of the popular front as a distinct political entity. Such a position may be plausible, though in our view wrong, in the case of two different candidates of a popular front, one bourgeois and the other working-class; but how can this be maintained when there is a single candidate of the coalition? Should we take a different attitude toward the candidate of the popular front depending on whether it is Mitterrand (Socialist) or Fabre (Radical) running for president? The workers would not understand this, and with reason. Revolutionary French workers will one day hold the LO, FCR and OCI responsible for their capitulation before the popular front.

In Chile, the MIR's position of critical support for Allende determined its capitulationist policies throughout the three years of Popular Unity government, and it was a similar policy which prevented all the ostensible Trotskyist groups in that country from crystallizing a revolutionary opposition to the popular front. The core of the Trotskyist policy in Chile was to give no political support to the UP, not matter how critical, and warn the masses from the beginning that the popular front was preparing the way for a bloody massacre. A policy of critical electoral support to the workers parties of the popular front (which, incidentally, accounted for about 95 percent of the UP vote) would fundamentally undercut and make a mockery of this hard Bolshevik line. "You say you do not support the popular front politically against the other bourgeois parties," a militant worker might well reply, "but you helped put it in power in the first place. Your call for a break from the political bloc with the bourgeoisie is nothing but words. The Trotskyists talk big, but at the decisive points they capitulate just like the M.I.R." If we had called for votes for Allende in 1970, or for the

Socialist Party in the April 1973 Chilean elections as did the USec affiliate (PSR), then we would stand naked before such an attack.

The question of Trotskyist policies toward popular fronts has recently presented itself to us in two additional aspects which deserve mention. Both in France and Canada we have given critical electoral support to candidates of ostensibly Trotskyist parties which have run in opposition to popular fronts, although they in turn do support the workers parties' candidates of class-collaborationist coalitions. We do not view the question of a popular front as a form of original sin which is visited upon even the fourth generation removed (e.g., "critical support to a party which gives critical support to a party which gives critical support to ...is unprincipled"). Their candidacies are, although fundamentally deformed, an attempt to express opposition to the class collaboration of the popular front. ON the other hand, where an independent candidacy is on a program no less collaborationist, expressing no real opposition to the principle of popular frontism, and the workers have no illusions in this party (for instance, the Communist Party of Canada), then it is absurd to call for votes to its candidates.

In the current Canadian elections we have faced another important question, namely the existence of a de facto "corridor coalition" between the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) and Trudeau's Liberals. Ostensibly the NDP is running independently in the election. However, it is campaigning on its program of "making Parliament work," i.e., obtaining marginal reforms in return for parliamentary support to the Liberals; and the NDP leader, Lewis, has declared that in the event of a Liberal minority he would again support Trudeau in parliament. In such circumstances one would have to be at least partially blind not to see the existence of a real coalition -- consequently we call on the NDP to break with the Liberals as a *condition* for electoral support. In Germany, where the Social Democrats have been ruling in coalition with the Free Democrats we would take the same position -- i.e., a pledge to refuse coalitions with bourgeois parties as a precondition to any support, however critical, to its candidates.

We hope these examples make clear our views on this question and we repeat that we find your suggested policy toward the 1973 French elections in contradiction to your strong criticisms of the OCI politics whose tactical implementation, however, is voting for the working-class parties of a popular front....

Comradely,
Jan Norden
John Sharpe

From Millerand to Mitterrand . . .

Popular Front Chains the Workers

The following article is reprinted from *The Internationalist* No. 2, April-May 1997.

Break with the Class Collaborators! Build a Trotskyist Party!

As France heats up with protests over the growing threat of the fascist National Front (FN) of Jean-Marie Le Pen and against the right-wing government's anti-immigrant Debré Law, the response of the reformist workers parties has been to seek a political alliance with "democratic" sectors of the ruling class. In early February, the Socialist Party (PS) held a convention at which they drew up a slate of candidates for the 1998 parliamentary elections, including representatives of the Radical Socialists and the Greens, two minor bourgeois parties. At the same time, desperately trying to stave off an FN victory in municipal elections in the Marseille suburb of Vitrolles, both the PS and the Communist Party (PCF) called in the second, decisive round of voting for a "republican front."

This traditional French form of electoral class-collaboration consists of calling on all supporters of the "values of the Republic" to unite behind a single candidate to oppose a fascist, monarchist or other ultra-reactionary. In the case of Vitrolles, the standard-bearer was a notoriously corrupt Socialist; in other cases, this means telling the workers to vote for candidates of right-wing "republican" capitalist parties on the grounds that they are supposedly a lesser evil compared to an even more rightist candidate. In reality, such coalitions with the bourgeoisie—the classic example being the Popular Front which arose in the 1930s—serve above all to strangle the struggles of the workers and oppressed against their exploiters and oppressors. Far from blocking the fascists, the popular front serves as a roadblock to revolution, and thus prepares the way for the victory of capitalist reaction. Defending the fundamental Marxist principle of the political independence of the working class, Trotskyists call for *proletarian opposition to the popular front and no vote to any candidate of class-collaborationist coalitions.*

Ever since the Dreyfus affair at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, "The Republic in danger!" has been the cry of alarm of the frightened reformists as they seek refuge in the embrace of the bourgeoisie. When the French Army general staff, the high clergy, and assorted royalists and aristocrats used the 1894 frame-up treason trial of a Jewish officer, Alfred Dreyfus, to mobilize against the parliamentary republic, the initial response of most French Socialists

was indifference. The "workerist" wing led by Jules Guèsde argued that this was nothing but a dispute within the bourgeoisie, of no concern to the workers. But recognizing the militarist-monarchist-clericalist threat, Socialist leader Jean Jaurès took up the battle in defense of Dreyfus against the rightist-nationalist conspiracy. The *dreyfusards* correctly stood for intransigent proletarian defense of democratic rights. Yet as the crisis came to a head and France headed to the brink of civil war, instead of mobilizing the workers in revolutionary struggle, in 1899 Jaurès endorsed the entry of the Socialist minister Alexandre-Étienne Millerand into the bourgeois Radical government of Waldeck-Rousseau.

This "socialist ministerialism" was a *betrayal* of the interests of the working class, as Guèsde, Paul Lafargue and other revolutionary socialists insisted. In her essay on "The Socialist Crisis in France" (1900) Rosa Luxemburg wrote bitterly:

"The Republic is in danger! Therefore it was necessary that a Socialist become the bourgeois minister of trade. The Republic is in danger! Therefore the Socialist had to remain in the ministry even after the massacre of striking workers on the island of Martinique and in Chalon. The Republic is in danger! As a result, the inquiry into this massacre had to be rejected, the parliamentary investigation into the colonial atrocity was quashed, and an amnesty declared."

With its job completed of "saving the Republic" *from the workers*, the Waldeck-Rousseau cabinet was unceremoniously dismissed in 1902, although Millerand later continued his ministerial career as a bourgeois Radical. Luxemburg summed up the disastrous experience:

"And so the books are closed on ministerial socialism. Going from defeat to defeat, it eventually experienced the fiasco of 'republican defense,' of social reform, of coalition politics and finally of socialist unity. Instead of the promised strengthening of the 'political and economic power' of the working class, it only brought political weakening and disorganization. And also *moral degradation* on top of this."

—Rosa Luxemburg, "The Close of the Socialist Crisis in France" (1902)

Luxemburg's devastating verdict on Millerandism could be applied almost word for word 90 years later to the 14-year presidential reign of the François Mitterrand. Their policy consisting of anti-working-class austerity, anti-immigrant racism and anti-Soviet Cold War, the initial Socialist cabinets (with PCF ministers)

soon passed over without a hitch to “cohabitation” of the Socialist president with a right-wing cabinet. After a dozen years in and out of ministerial office, the reformist left has become synonymous with the status quo, the rampant corruption of the parliamentary regime, and the mass unemployment and racist police terror against “foreigners” which demoralize the working class and provide fodder for the fascists.

From Millerand to Mitterrand, “socialist” ministerialism under different names (Left Bloc in the 1920s, Popular Front in the 1930s and ‘40s, Union of the Left in the 1970s and ‘80s) has been the penultimate recourse of the capitalist ruling class to tame a rebellious proletariat. If the “progressive” rhetoric and reactionary policies of the popular front are insufficient to submit the workers to the dictates of capital, the bourgeoisie’s ultimate weapon is fascism and the iron fist of naked bonapartist military rule. The classic case is of the Popular Front government of the Socialist Léon Blum of 1936-38. Today, while Mitterrand’s Union of the Left is deeply discredited, many French workers look back to the Popular Front as a golden age when the eight-hour day and paid vacations were first introduced. Yet these concessions were granted by the bourgeoisie in extremis as the price for *stopping workers revolution*. The Blum government lasted only a couple of years in office, then gave way to the right-wing Radical Daladier, who handed over power to Marshal Pétain, who in turn ceded half of France to Hitler and presided over the rest of the country as a de facto Nazi protectorate.

Since many French leftists have illusions in the popular front, and most of the misnamed “far left” wants to recreate it, it is crucial for authentic Trotskyists to hammer home the bitter lessons of class collaboration. The very first act of Leon Blum’s cabinet as it took office in June 1936 was to quash a massive general strike that swept the country in anticipation of the new regime. The first strikes broke out a week after the victory of the Popular Front in the May elections. On May 24, hundreds of thousands of workers came out to commemorate the 1871 Paris Commune at the Mur des Fédérés in Père Lachaise Cemetery where the *communards* were shot. On May 28, Renault workers occupied their plant and raised the red flag. Soon metal workers throughout Paris had struck.

As the strike movement spread to the provinces, by June 4 some 12,000 strikes had been reported, 9,000 of them plant occupations. In an article titled “The French Revolution Has Begun!” (9 June 1936), Leon Trotsky wrote: “The movement takes on the character of an epidemic. The contagion spreads from factory to factory, from craft to craft, from district to district. All the layers of the working class seem to be

giving echoing answers to a roll call.... These are not just strikes. This is a *strike*. This is the open rallying of the oppressed against the oppressors. This is the classic beginning of a revolution.” The bulk of the militant workers were following the Communist Party. Trotsky noted that in the past, the PCF had often called for “Soviets Everywhere!” in situations where this slogan was completely artificial. Now it was not, and Trotsky wrote: “‘Soviets Everywhere’? Agreed. But it is time to pass from words to action.”

Instead, the PCF leadership went all out to *stop* the strike and *prevent* the appearance of workers councils. On June 11, in a meeting of Communist militants in Paris, PCF leader Maurice Thorez spelled out the counterrevolutionary policy: “It is not a question of taking power at present.... So it is necessary to know how to end a strike” (quoted in Jacques Danos and Marcel Gibelin, *Juin 36* [1972]). Thorez’ second in command, Jacques Duclos, wrote an article in the PCF’s *L’Humanité* (27 June 1936), titled “The Radicals Are Right,” referring to the bourgeois party that was the linchpin of the French Third Republic (1871-1940). Summing up the meaning of the popular front, Duclos wrote: “We are there to maintain order.” He went on:

“The Radicals are right when they say they will not accept any threat to private property, and we Communists do not hesitate to proclaim that this is also our concern.... In short, the radicals are right to recall that *the reforms on which the parties of the Popular Front have agreed, when you add them all up, are nothing but the old program of the [bourgeois] Radical Socialist Party.*”

—cited in Charles Berg and Stéphane Just, *Fronts populaires d’hier et d’aujourd’hui* (1977)

The Stalinists’ exhortations were backed up with muscle. The Blum government immediately seized the first issue of the Trotskyist newspaper, *La Lutte Ouvrière* (Workers Struggle), when it came out on June 12 with the front page headlines:

“IN THE FACTORIES AND IN THE STREETS,
POWER TO THE WORKERS

“Go Over From Strike Committees to Standing Factory Committees!

“Form Your Armed Workers Militias!”

The Trotskyist paper also called for a congress of factory committees to prepare the struggle. That same day, a meeting of representatives of 250 enterprises in the Paris region called for the formation of a liaison committee among the factories. Deathly afraid that soviets could indeed spring up everywhere, the Popular Front with the Stalinists as chief hatchet men rushed to put a halt to the burgeoning unrest. The means were the Matignon Accords. The terms originally negotiated on June 7 by Blum with representatives of the employers and union tops included a pay

raise, no reprisals and the right to unionize. The PCF declared victory, but the metal workers refused to go back. Finally, on June 12, in desperation the bosses agreed to two weeks' paid vacation and a 40-hour workweek with no loss in pay. It was that or else let the revolution continue to unfold.

Over the next two years, the Blum government gradually wore down the workers' militancy. Meanwhile, the monarchist and fascist right grew increasingly aggressive, emboldened by the advance of Franco in Spain with the aid of Hitler and Mussolini. Originally, at the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in July 1935, the popular front was put forward by Stalin's henchman Georgi Dimitrov as a "People's Front against fascism." While throwing in empty rhetoric about "resolute action by the revolutionary proletariat," Dimitrov insisted it should not be so radical as to let the right wing "terrorize the petty bourgeoisie with the spectre of the 'red menace'." The adoption of the popular front marked the point at which the Stalinized Comintern definitively passed from bureaucratic centrism, characterized by wild zig-zags, to antirevolutionary reformism, joining with the social democrats in pledging with the workers' blood to uphold the rule of the bourgeoisie.

What the popular front actually meant for the fight against fascism was brought home on 16 March 1937, when fascists decided to hold a meeting in the Paris suburb of Clichy. After the government refused to ban it, local officials called a counterdemonstration. The Socialist minister of the interior called in the police, who fired on the anti-fascist mobilization, killing five and wounding hundreds. Stalinist leader Thorez' only comment was to blame everything on "dirty Trotskyites." Workers at Renault and elsewhere struck in protest, but the PCF once again headed it off, voting confidence in the Blum government in parliament. In December 1937, when the Gardes Mobiles riot police attempted to break up a plant occupation at the Good-year tire factory, 30,000 workers surrounded the plant to stop it. But the union tops ordered a return to work. Four months later, as an ever bolder right wing attacked the Popular Front, Blum resigned, replaced by the Radical Edouard Daladier.

As the workers were thoroughly demoralized by the Popular Front in office, when the CGT called a half-hearted general strike on 30 November 1938, in a last-ditch attempt to block the right, it was broken by army troops occupying the train stations. Ten days later, Daladier formed a National Bloc with the right, the workweek was extended up to 60 hours, the Popular Front was dead. In March 1939, the Daladier government demanded full powers and repression against the left was stepped up. After the outbreak of the Sec-

ond World War in September 1939, the Communist Party was banned. By 10 July 1940, after the French Army collapsed before the German Wehrmacht, what was left of the Chamber of Deputies elected in May 1936 (the Communists having meanwhile been thrown out) voted to hand over power to Marshal Pétain. The next day he declared himself president, seized legislative power and abolished the Republic.

What lay behind this ignominious demise of the Popular Front in France? Various pseudo-explanations have been put forward. Guy Bourdé in his book, *La défaite du front populaire* (1977) lists several: the points of the 1936 electoral pact meant different things to the different signers, its economic policy was incoherent and impotent, it was constantly under the threat of war. All true, but the fundamental explanation is far simpler: the Popular Front had fulfilled its mission for the French ruling class. It straitjacketed the workers at the crucial moment, and with the crisis past it was no longer needed to protect the interests of capital—so it was cast aside. Even before the 1936 election, Trotsky had warned in a prophetic article titled "France at the Turning Point" (March 1936): "The People's Front, the conspiracy between the labor bureaucracy and the worst political exploiters of the middle classes, is capable only of killing the faith of the masses in the revolutionary road and of driving them into the arms of the fascist counterrevolution." Following the debacle of the 30 November 1938 "general strike," Trotsky summed up the bitter lessons:

"In order to lead the revolutionary struggle for power, it is necessary to clearly see the class from which the power must be wrested. The workers did not recognize the enemy because he was disguised as a friend. In order to struggle for power, it is necessary, moreover, to have the instruments of struggle: the party, trade unions, and soviets. The workers were deprived of these instruments because the leaders of the workers' organizations formed a wall around the bourgeois power in order to disguise it, to render it unrecognizable and invulnerable. Thus the revolution that began found itself braked, arrested, demoralized.

"The past two and a half years since then have revealed step by step the impotence, the falsity, and the hollowness of the People's Front. What appeared to the laboring masses as a 'popular' government is revealed to be simply a temporary mask of the imperialist bourgeoisie. This mask is now discarded. The bourgeoisie apparently thinks that the workers are sufficiently deluded and weakened; that the immediate danger of a revolution has passed. The ministry of Daladier is only, in accordance with the design of the bourgeoisie, an unavoidable stage in passing over to a stronger and more substantial government of the imperialist dictatorship."

—Leon Trotsky, "The Decisive Hour" (December 1938)

Today, in the heated exchanges between the right-

wing government and the parliamentary opposition, one of the leaders of the conservative majority, François Léotard, head of the UDF (Union of French Democracy) denounced “this seeking refuge in the past which evokes Marshal Pétain, while forgetting to say that it was the Chamber of Deputies of the Popular Front which brought us to that.... We will have no complacency, either for the Popular Front or for the National Front.” As *Le Monde* (18 March 1997) editorialized, this was an echo of the sinister slogan of Léotard’s forebears in the late 1930s, “better Hitler than the Popular Front!” Meanwhile, *Le Figaro Magazine* (1 March 1997), house organ of the by now not-so-New Right, publishes yet another vile apology for the Vichy regime. This really is proto-fascist propaganda. But the reformists cannot disguise the fact that the Popular Front did prepare the way for Pétain.

One need only to look at the history of François Mitterrand, who began his political career in 1934 as a member of the National Volunteers, a satellite of the Croix de Feu (Cross of Fire), an ultra-rightist veterans organization. He later became an official of the secret police of the Vichy regime, where he put together lists of Communists, Socialists and other “anti-national elements.” For this dirty work Mitterrand received the “Francisque,” the highest award of the Vichy regime. Opportunistically switching sides during the war, afterwards Mitterrand founded the tiny UDSR (Democratic Socialist Union of the Resistance) as an anti-Communist vehicle. He became a member of virtually every government of the Fourth Republic, lasting from 1945 to De Gaulle’s takeover in 1958. Mitterrand was minister eleven times, including colonial minister, and justice minister during the Algerian war, signing a decree giving full powers to the military (i.e., the green light for the dirty war) and signing a death sentence for a PCF member of the Algerian FLN, Fernand Yveton. Mitterrand is the man who in the Fifth Republic became the perennial presidential candidate of the “left” (in 1965 and 1974) until he was finally elected in 1981 and reelected in 1988.

The former Vichy secret policeman turned Socialist Mitterrand acted as a fireman for the bourgeoisie. As the flames of the tumultuous 1968 worker-student revolt were dying down, he rushed to offer himself as president as the man who could definitively put out the conflagration—and keep it out. And the task conferred by the bourgeoisie on the Union of the Left, this latter-day popular front, was to liquidate the legacy of 1968. Mitterrand adroitly accomplished this mission, enlisting former “far-leftists” to carry out anti-working-class, anti-immigrant, anti-Soviet policies which greatly demoralized the workers and strengthened the right, paving the way for the Chirac-Juppé government and providing the feeding trough for the fascist National Front.

From Millerand to Mitterrand, “socialist ministerialism” has been the antechamber to right-wing reaction. As Trotsky wrote in the Transitional Program (1938), “‘People’s Fronts’ on the one hand—fascism on the other; these are the last political resources of imperialism in the struggle against the proletarian revolution.” Nor is this limited to France: in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), the Stalinists beheaded the proletarian revolution on the altar of the Republic, paving the way for bloody victory of Franco; in Indonesia, the CP’s disastrous support to the nationalist Sukarno led to the 1965 CIA-sponsored massacre of more than a million Communists; in Chile, Salvador Allende’s Unidad Popular led to the Pinochet coup in 1973. Historical experience throughout this century shows that *the popular front means workers blood*.

It is up to the Trotskyists to drive home this truth in the struggle to forge a genuinely Bolshevik-Leninist party, a party which can break the stranglehold of the reformists over the working class, a party which can provide the revolutionary leadership to mobilize the exploited and oppressed to crush the fascists in the egg, and open the road not to new Vichys but to new Red Octobers. ■

The ICL's New Line In Mexico

To Fight the Popular Front You Have to Recognize That It Exists

Open Letter to the Grupo Espartaquista de México and the Juventud Espartaquista

The following is a translation of a leaflet issued by the Internationalist Group in Mexico on 5 May 1997. It is reprinted from The Internationalist No. 3, September-October 1997.

Dear Comrades:

The Grupo Espartaquista de México (GEM) was founded in struggle against the Cardenista popular front. In this struggle, we applied to Mexico the program of the Spartacist tendency (now the Internationalist Communist League) of intransigent proletarian opposition to all popular fronts, which subordinate the exploited and oppressed to the politicians and institutions of the bourgeoisie.

But now, as part of the right turn of the ICL leadership, the GEM *denies the existence in Mexico of a popular front*, a class-collaborationist coalition. This revision of fundamental conceptions on Mexico can only disorient those who seek to fight against the subordination of the exploited and oppressed to the bourgeois "opposition." Without such a struggle, it is impossible to forge the Trotskyist party which is needed to lead the socialist revolution.

The Internationalist Group, formed by leading cadres of the ICL expelled last year, has noted that the recent events in the ICL have their own logic. The bureaucratic expulsions paved the way for a betrayal in Brazil. The ICL had correctly encouraged the struggle of the Liga Quarta-Internacionalista do Brasil/Luta Metalúrgica to throw police out of the Volta Redonda municipal workers union. But when the struggle heated up, the "new I.S." (International Secretariat) of the ICL decided it posed "unacceptable risks to the vanguard" and called on the LQB to abandon the struggle, dissociate itself publicly from the union leadership and even get out of town. When the Brazilian comrades did not agree to act in this irresponsible and treacherous way, the ICL handed them a sealed envelope with a letter breaking fraternal relations with the LQB—one day before the 19 June 1996 union meeting where the disaffiliation of the cops was scheduled to be voted. The I.S. attempted to cover its flight from this important class battle by heaping one slander after another on top of the Brazilian comrades.

In our publications we have shown that the ICL's turn has been accompanied, as is the historical norm in

these cases, by the revision of basic conceptions held by the organization for many years. The effective defense of an immigrant hostel in Berlin, carried out in 1993, was renounced. A new line was "discovered" on the capitalist reunification of Germany: during the intervention in the German events of 1989-90, the most important intervention in its history, the ICL stressed that the Western bourgeoisie used the Social Democracy as its "spearhead" and "Trojan horse" for counterrevolution, while the Stalinists capitulated and sold out the bureaucratically deformed workers state. But now the new line says that the Stalinists not only played a counterrevolutionary role (which is correct) but that they literally led the counterrevolution (which is false and disorienting). (For more details, see issue No. 2 of *The Internationalist*.)

Now the conceptions which the ICL put forward on Mexico since before the foundation of the GEM are being revised, conceptions that were expressed not only in the first seven issues of *Espartaco* [newspaper of the GEM], but in the ICL's other publications as well. We had already noted that starting with issue No. 8, *Espartaco* stopped referring to the *semi-bonapartist* nature of the PRI [Institutional Revolutionary Party]/government regime, which for decades has rested largely on the *corporatist* structures of the CTM [the state-controlled Federation of Mexican Labor], and which is now in crisis. The same is the case with *Workers Vanguard*, newspaper of the Spartacist League/U.S.: the articles on Mexico published in issues No. 647 (7 June 1996), No. 658 (27 December 1996) and No. 664 (21 March 1997) do not refer to the semi-bonapartist nature of the PRI regime, nor to the serious political crisis it confronts today, nor do they put forward transitional demands for proletarian struggle.

Espartaco No. 9 (Spring-Summer 1997) recently came out, and it struck us that while it correctly denounces the bourgeois character of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, it makes no reference to the *popular front*. Nevertheless, we did not want to jump to conclusions.

Nor did we want to launch a phony polemic such as the one put forward by the ICL when it absurdly and dishonestly accuses us of “disappearing” the theory of permanent revolution, when anyone who reads our publications can see that the permanent revolution is an essential part of our program. So we decided to check it out.

At a student protest we asked the editor of *Espartaco*, and he told us that, sure enough, they had changed the line and they now hold that *there is no popular front in Mexico*. Then, during the May Day march we asked several GEM comrades, who confirmed that this is the new line and that the formulations in the new issue were “carefully” written. However, *Espartaco* has changed its line without explaining this change to its readers, who since the publication was founded had read that there *is* a popular front in this country. Meanwhile, we were told the fairy tale that “before,” *Espartaco* used to talk about the existence of a popular front in Mexico due to the nefarious influence of its previous editor, who was one of the comrades purged last year.

Origin and Function of the Cardenista Popular Front

In response to a wave of workers’ strikes, student protests and unrest in the countryside, a new popular front arose in Mexico in 1987-88 under the leadership of long-time PRI politicians Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Porfirio Muñoz Ledo. Passing through a series of forms and incarnations, this popular front has always had the same function: to tie the exploited to the exploiters and channel their discontent toward a “recycled” bourgeois alternative, given the crisis of the semi-bonapartist PRI/government regime.

We always emphasized that the struggle against this popular front is key to the construction of a Trotskyist party in Mexico. After the Mexico station of the international Spartacist tendency was founded in 1988, one of its founders made a public declaration at a meeting called by the Mandelite PRT (and attended by Ernest Mandel and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas) at the Leon Trotsky Museum. The Spartacist representative emphasized:

“Today in Mexico a new popular front has been formed. Trotsky defined the popular front as a class-collaborationist alliance subordinating the proletariat to a sector of the exploiters. . . . Against the popular front, and against the apologists for the popular front, Trotsky founded the Fourth International, world party of socialist revolution. It is necessary to reforge that Bolshevik-Leninist Fourth International of Trotsky.”

This declaration is reproduced in the Spanish-language

edition of *Spartacist* No. 21 (October 1988), together with an article explaining the crisis of “the semi-bonapartist regime in Mexico, now in full decay” and the role of the “corporatist, gangster-buttressed CTM union bureaucracy which to this day enforces PRI control of the labor and peasant movements.” Under the subtitle, “Cárdenas and the New Popular Front,” another article in the same issue explained the origins of this popular front and how it was joined by countless leaders of “independent” unions, fake leftists, former guerrillaists, etc. [These two articles were adapted from the English versions published in *Workers Vanguard* Nos. 456 and 457 (1 and 15 July 1988).]

But the popular front and its malignant role in the subordination of the workers and peasants, as well as of discontented youth, did not cease to exist after the elections held on 6 July 1988. The first leaflet published by the Grupo Espartaquista de México, on the national strike carried out in 1989 by half a million dissident teachers, stressed: “The key is a Trotskyist workers party, forged on the basis of the program of the permanent revolution, which fights not only against the PRI government but also against the ‘back-up option’ of the Mexican (and international) bourgeoisie: the Cardenista popular front.”

A leaflet against the Mexican Mandelites, “The PRT in the Cárdenas Popular Front” (30 October 1989) explained that Cárdenas’ new bourgeois party, the PRD was leading a popular front and that the latter was not only of an electoral nature:

“The PRT leadership maintains that it is not convenient to make an ‘electoral’ front with the bourgeois PRD, but that it is fine to swear loyalty to the bourgeois state as part of a ‘patriotic front’ with the PRD. Surprising as it may be to parliamentary cretins, history has known many ‘non-electoral’ popular fronts, from China in 1927, Spain through three years of civil war and the support of the Stalinist CPs to ‘democratic’ imperialism in the Second World War, to the ‘clandestine’ popular fronts formed in Bolivia, Chile and other countries.”

In June 1990, the fusion bulletin of the GEM and the Trotskyist Faction expelled by the Morenoites (*Del morenismo al trotskismo—La Cuestión Rusa a quemarropa*) referred to the “popular front of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas,” and the fight against this class-collaborationist alliance was a central point in “What Is *Espartaco* and What Does It Want,” the article which introduced the GEM’s publication, which resulted from this fusion. Another article from *Espartaco* No. 1 (Winter 1990-91) gave a detailed explanation of our principled policy against this popular front. The same conceptions were expressed in each of the subsequent issues of *Espartaco*; in the joint declaration

against the North American Free Trade Agreement by the Canadian U.S. and Mexican sections of the ICL; in the founding declaration of the Juventud Espartaquista (Spartacist Youth—see *Espartaco* No. 7, Winter 1995-96) and all the other key documents.

But is it true that the profusion of references to the popular front in the Mexican Spartacist press was due to some kind of diabolical conspiracy? This theory is absurd on the face of it, as absurd as the many other accusations of the same kind that have been made. But if anyone takes it seriously, all they have to do is consult the other publications of the ICL, from *Workers Vanguard* and *Women and Revolution* (see No. 38, Winter 1990-91) to *Spartacist*, organ of the ICL. In fact, the document of the ICL's Second International Conference contains a section on Mexico which begins:

“Mexico City Station was established...in 1988, at a time of considerable labor and political turmoil. It was the first Spartacist group functioning in Latin America. In the face of nationalist left support for the bourgeois presidential candidacy of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, including indirectly from the Mandelites and Morenoites, our tiny group has been unique in its unflinching proletarian opposition to this popular-frontism and its exposure of the left's capitulation to it. While support for the Cardenista popular front crested in the '88 elections and has since considerably ebbed, it has played a key role in derailing class struggle.”

—“For the Communism of Lenin and Trotsky!”
Spartacist No. 47-48 (Winter 1992-93)

How could it derail the class struggle if it did not exist? The point is that it did exist and it continues to exist. (As for the Mandelite party, it liquidated so as to better submerge itself in the popular front, while each of the spectrum of Morenoite groups capitulates to the popular front in its own way.)

Implications of the New Line

This is not an academic discussion. If you do not understand the functions and the crisis of the semi-bonapartist structure in Mexico, it is impossible to programmatically orient the Mexican proletariat to break the corporatist stranglehold and build the revolutionary, internationalist workers party which is indispensable for the socialist revolution. If you do not understand the question of the popular front, that means being disoriented in the struggle for the political independence of the working class. When Salvador Allende formed the Unidad Popular in 1970 in Chile, the Morenoites denied that the UP was a popular front, because they wanted to capitulate to this class-collaborationist front. In Mexico, the “ex-Morenoite” Liga de Trabajadores por el Socialismo denies the ex-

istence of an “organic” popular front. This line served them when it came to sowing illusions in the National Democratic Convention (CND) and other popular-frontist groupings.

But even if one does not seek to capitulate to the popular front, it is difficult to fight it if you deny its existence!

The question of the CND is a good example. To deny the existence of the popular front would have blunted the revolutionary edge of the Trotskyist position on this assembly, which was called two years ago by the EZLN. While defending the Zapatistas against repression by the bourgeois state, the GEM correctly wrote, in a front-page article highlighting the slogans “Break with the Popular Front! Forge a Revolutionary Workers Party!”:

“Thus this petty-bourgeois nationalist movement used its moral and political authority to strengthen the bourgeois popular front led by the PRD, calling on Cárdenas to head up a ‘movement of national liberation,’ a (bourgeois) transition government, etc. This was the programmatic basis for the calls on ‘civil society’ with the ‘National Democratic Convention’ and the ‘consultation’ carried out this summer, after which Marcos called for a ‘National Dialogue among all patriotic forces’.”

—*Espartaco* No. 7 (Winter 1995-96)

The EZLN then united with a range of forces to form the Frente Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, which in reality serves as another instrument to “unofficially” subordinate rebellious sectors to the bourgeois party of Cárdenas, the PRD.

And what about today? According to the new line of the GEM, how can one understand the subordination to the PRD of a whole range of trade-union, peasant, student, slum dwellers', women's and other organizations which do not form an organic part of that party? Do you believe that a popular front cannot exist unless it has an “official” name and an “organic” structure? The writings of Trotsky, as well as more than years of Spartacist publications, amply show that this is not the case.

A few days ago, on May Day, we saw the popular front in action. In the Zócalo (Mexico City's central plaza) there were two rallies. In front of the cathedral were the “dissident” *charros* [pro-government “union” bureaucrats] from the Congress of Labor (CT) grouped in the Labor Forum. In front of City Hall was the platform of the Intersindical (Union Coordinating Committee) that is, the popular-frontist opposition to the PRI “unionism” of the CTM and CT. There were speeches by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the PRD's candidate for Mexico City mayor, and by Benito Mirón Lince, lawyer for the SUTAU bus drivers' union and

now a PRD “non-member candidate” for federal deputy and member of the FAC-MLN (Broad Front for the Construction of a National Liberation Movement), an extra-parliamentary component of the Cardenista popular front. Of the several union speakers, the spokesman for the *La Jornada* newspaper workers union “stated that the economic changes demanded by the working class must first be political changes”—in other words, a scarcely veiled call to vote for the bourgeois opposition in the upcoming elections.

It is very likely that Cárdenas may win the election, with explicit or tacit support from innumerable organizations that are not an organic part of the bourgeois PRD. In *La Jornada* (2 May) we read the following:

“Yesterday the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) released the final list of its nationwide candidates for the parliamentary elections, made up of leaders of university unions, the SNTE [teachers union] and FAT [Authentic Labor Front]; also of peasant organizations such as the CIOAC, UNTA and CODUC, ex-members of the CNC [pro-government peasant federation], the UCD; leaders and activists from the El Barzón [debtors movement] and slum dwellers’ organizations.... In the first places on the list, more than 50 per cent of the candidates were not members [of the PRD].”

Yes, there is a popular front in Mexico! Due to the crisis of the semi-bonapartist PRI regime, the bourgeoisie needs the popular front as a bourgeois “alternative.” To deny its existence is hazardous to the Trotskyist program.

The fight for genuine class independence, which is possible only under revolutionary leadership, is an urgent and basic task. It is necessary to fight to break the control over the proletariat exercised not only by the PRI but by the bourgeoisie as a whole. Above and beyond the disputes dividing the various union tops, there is a common effort to subordinate the working class to “the historic alliance between the workers of Mexico and the Mexican state,” as president Zedillo put it in his speech to the CTM/CT officials who shut themselves inside the National Auditorium. The [CT dissidents’] Labor Forum wants to take the place of the worn-out apparatus of Fidel Velázquez [head of the CTM] as the main instrument for regimenting the

Trotsky on the Popular Front in the Colonial and Semi-Colonial Countries

“The treacherous policy of class collaboration, through which the Kremlin for the last five years has been helping the capitalist governments prepare for war, was abruptly liquidated by the bourgeoisie, just as soon as they ceased to need a pacifist disguise. But in the colonial and semicolonial countries – not only in China and India, but in Latin America – the fraud of the ‘People’s Fronts’ still continues to paralyze the working masses, converting them into cannon-fodder for the “progressive” bourgeoisie and in this way creating an indigenous political basis for imperialism....”

–Leon Trotsky, “Manifesto of the Fourth International on the Imperialist War and the Proletarian World Revolution” (May 1940)

workers. For their part, the popular frontists seek to reformulate this “alliance,” in reality a straitjacket for the exploited, through the victory of that neo-PRI, the PRD.

But if you deny the existence of the popular front, you cannot fight for the unions to break from it. If the proletariat does not break from the Cardenista popular front, it cannot fight for power, for a workers and peasants government and the extension of socialist revolution to the south and above all to the imperialist metropolis, the U.S. In denying even the existence of the popular front, the leadership of the GEM and the ICL shows they are not interested in fighting for revolutionary leadership of the working class.

The recent publications and behavior of the ICL give the impression of an organization which has lost its political moorings. This is not surprising. First the conceptions on what occurred in Germany were revised. Then came the purge in Mexico, the bureaucratic expulsions and the betrayal in Brazil. Now basic conceptions on Mexico are thrown overboard. What next?

Fraternally,
The Internationalist Group
5 May 1997

SL Leadership Now Says No Popular Fronts in U.S.

So How About the NPAC Popular Front?

The following article is reprinted from The Internationalist No. 4, January-February 1998.

First, to recapitulate: Last spring, comrades of the Internationalist Group in Mexico noticed that the latest publication of the Grupo Espartaquista de México (GEM) wrote about the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas without saying a word about the *popular front* around the PRD. Was this a change in the position of the Spartacist League and the International Communist League (SL/ICL), of which the GEM is the Mexican section? At the May Day march the IG comrades asked, and were told that, indeed, the GEM now denied that there was a Cardenista popular front in Mexico. The Internationalist Group wrote an open letter to the GEM on “The ICL’s New Line—To Fight the Popular Front You Have to Recognize That It Exists” (5 May 1997), printed in *The Internationalist* No. 3 (September-October 1997). At a GEM public forum our comrades pointed out that this revision of a longstanding ICL position was full of implications. Eventually, the SL’s *Workers Vanguard* (No. 672, 8 August) came out with a lengthy article on Mexico devoted to “answering” the IG, after a fashion. That is to say, in what has become the distinctive style of the new *WV*, the article strung together distortions, inventions, speculations and all kinds of sleight of hand in order to waffle around the fact that the ICL had changed its line.

The *WV* article argued essentially that there could be no popular front in Mexico, at least not now nor in the past, for lack of a mass workers party to be part of it. Nor, for the same reason, could there be such a class-collaborationist coalition in the U.S., they argued. We replied: So what about the National Peace Action Coalition (NPAC), an “antiwar” front in the ‘70s that in the past the SL/U.S. had always called a popular front? Well, that was then, it turns out. Now we have it on good authority (see page 56) that the SL considers NPAC only to have been “popular-frontist,” which SL leaders insist is a different animal. After those who went on to found the Internationalist Group were expelled in 1996 from the ICL in the U.S. and Mexico, where they had been leading cadres for many years, we warned that the reconstituted ICL leadership was beginning to revise key Spartacist positions from the past: first, declaring that the Stalinists “led” counterrevolution in the Soviet Union and East Europe, then declaring there was no popular front in Mexico. Now NPAC has ceased to be a popular front by a wave of *WV*’s magic wand.

But let’s go back to the beginning. The question of the popular front in Mexico is no third-rate question. A popular front is a coalition binding working-class organizations and the left to the bourgeoisie, or a section of it. Such a bloc serves as a straitjacket to hold the proletariat, as well as other oppressed groups such as the peasantry, in check by formally chaining them to the class enemy. The capitalist rulers and their reformist labor lieutenants typically resort to such coalitions of class collaboration in times of great social unrest, out of fear that the exploited masses might “get out of hand” and embark on struggle against capitalism itself. The popular front serves to dissipate the militancy of the working masses and demoralize them, thus preparing the way for the subsequent victory of bonapartist military dictatorships or outright fascism. Leon Trotsky, the co-leader of the Russian October Revolution and founder of the Fourth International, wrote that fascism and popular fronts were “the last political resources of imperialism in the struggle against the proletarian revolution.”

This was the counterrevolutionary role that the original “People’s Fronts” played in the 1930s in Spain, where it led to the victory of Franco in the Civil War, and in France where it defused a general strike and paved the way for the Nazi-allied Vichy régime. This was also the function that popular fronts played subsequently, from Indonesia in 1965 (where it led to the massacre of over a million Communists and workers at the hands of the CIA puppet General Suharto) to Chile in 1973, where Allende’s Popular Unity regime hogtied the workers and prepared the way for the bloody victory of General Pinochet, who still controls the Chilean military today. In the 1970s and ‘80s, while most of the left—including a host of groups claiming to be Trotskyist—capitulated in one way or another to popular fronts, precisely because they were popular, the Spartacist tendency (which later became the ICL) uniquely upheld the Trotskyist position of no political support “to” any popular front, calling instead for the revolutionary class independence of the proletariat and its allies. We fought bitter fights with pseudo-Trotskyists over Chile, over Portugal and the Union of the Left in France, as well as over “antiwar” popular fronts in the U.S.

In Mexico, the ICL warned from the very beginning of its work there (led by the comrades who were later

expelled and founded the IG) that a popular front was coming together around the 1988 presidential bid by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, a former high-ranking leader of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) which has run the country in the interests of domestic and imperialist capital since 1929. While PRI leaders were embracing Washington's "free market" brand of capitalism, selling off state-owned industries wholesale to their cronies, Cárdenas and other PRI dissidents worried that the combination of unbridled enrichment for those at the top and brutal austerity for those at the bottom could provoke an upheaval by the millions-strong Mexican working class and the huge discontented peasantry. So the dissidents left the PRI in order to rein in the burgeoning independent unions and the organizations of the urban and rural poor, as well as to put a leash on the ostensible left. The vehicle for this operation was a popular front around Cárdenas and the PRD, the bourgeois nationalist party which he founded in 1989.

For almost a decade the ICL and the GEM repeatedly warned of the danger represented by the Cardenista popular front and called on Mexican workers to break from it. After being robbed of victory in 1988, Cárdenas lost in the next presidential vote six years later. But as Mexico has continued to boil after the New Year's Day 1994 revolt by Zapatista Indians, and as the semi-bonapartist PRI regime has been coming apart at the seams, support grew for the PRD. In elections last July, Cárdenas was elected governor of the federal district (Mexico City), far out-scoring his rivals. Yet precisely at this moment, when illusions in Cárdenas were growing rapidly, the ICL leadership suddenly decided there was no need to fight against the popular front and simply declared it non-existent. How convenient. While still ritually referring to the bourgeois character of the PRD, the GEM has nowhere fought against the subordination of "independent" unions and the Mexican left to the popular front, even though its sole focus of activity (the National University) is a hotbed of Cárdenas support. In fact, the GEM didn't even bother to put out a single piece of propaganda for the July 6 election.

In justifying its new line, which it euphemistically called "sharpening" and "clarifying our past propaganda," *Workers Vanguard* came up with several threadbare arguments. First, WV claimed, you couldn't have a popular front in Mexico, because, "As in many semi-colonial countries, Mexico has not seen the development of even a reformist mass party of the working class," and instead the unions have been directly tied to bourgeois nationalism. Since when does this make a popular front impossible? We pointed out in our article, "Mexico Elections: Cárdenas Popular Front Chains Workers to Capitalism" (*Internationalist* No.

3), that these arguments would deny the existence of a popular front in India in the 1930s, in El Salvador in the 1980s, where militant unions and the left were tied to tiny bourgeois liberal parties, or in Indonesia today where unions are in the tow of the bourgeois nationalist party (also called the PRD) of Sukarno's daughter, or in Bolivia or any one of a number of countries where the ICL has always denounced popular-frontism.

It was not only in semi-colonial Mexico that WV denied "the supposed existence of a 'popular front' around the PRD," but there could also be no popular front in the United States, where there is also obviously no mass workers party. In our article, we responded by quoting how the Trotskyists in the 1930s wrote that there was a popular front around Roosevelt's New Deal Democratic Party. We also cited the example of "antiwar" popular fronts during the Vietnam War, in particular the National Peace Action Coalition sponsored by the SWP. We pointed out that the Spartacist polemics against the SWP's vaunted "peace coalitions" centered on denouncing these as popular fronts. We noted that in 1973, the SL's youth group put out a whole bulletin, titled *On the United Front* (recently reprinted in an attractively designed pamphlet), to explain this position historically.

So far, the ICL press has not responded to our polemic, but on two different occasions, SL members from Boston and New York have replied to questions from supporters of the Internationalist Group with identical responses: NPAC, they now say, was not a popular front but a "popular-frontist formation." In New York, this was repeated to us by two members of the SL's central committee. One of them later came back to make sure that we got it straight, that NPAC was a "popular-frontist formation," which, he emphasized, is not the same thing as a popular front.

Digging itself in deeper and deeper, the ICL leadership is now turning its back on one of the key political battles that won revolutionary minded young cadres to the SL's ranks in the early 1970s. It was over the SWP's popular-front coalition with "antiwar" bourgeois politicians as early as 1965 that the SL declared the SWP to be reformist. By 1970, the SWP was so deeply wedded to its alliance with Democratic Party "doves" that its marshals were linking arms to keep radical youth with Viet Cong flags out of their marches. And in July 1971, when the Spartacist League and supporters of the Progressive Labor Party-led Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) protested the presence of Democratic Senator Vance Hartke at an NPAC meeting, the SWP drew the class line in blood. With the SWP's chief goon Fred Halstead leading the charge, the protesters were physically expelled,

a PL/SDSer was heaved through a plate glass window and an SLer's nose was broken.

The Spartacist League emphasized over and over that this gangster attack was the direct consequence of the popular front. A leaflet issued on 3 July 1971 was headlined "The SWP in the NPAC Conference: Pop Front Sealed in Blood!" This leaflet was later included in the first bound volume of *Spartacist*. Two articles in *Workers' Action* (September 1971), the predecessor to *WV*, were headlined: "SWP Seals Alliance with Bourgeoisie in NPAC—Revolutionaries Beaten," and "NPAC: Fake Trotskyists Aid SWP in Pop Front Betrayal." Already before the SWP attack, a July 1971 *Spartacist* supplement was headlined, "Against NPAC Pop Fronts: For Class Action Against the War." The lead article stated: "The SWP has put itself on record that henceforward class collaboration with the imperialist liberals within the present Popular Front will be maintained at all costs: the initiation ceremony has been consummated by an act of shameless violence against revolutionaries."

Article after article in *Workers Vanguard* over the next two years denounced the NPAC popular front. An article on a student "peace" conference explained, "A popular front is a coalition of nominal socialists with the bourgeoisie; its program must be limited to the bourgeoisie's program as long as the 'socialists' desire the bourgeoisie's participation" (*WV* No. 7, April 1972). The question of the popular front character of this "antiwar" coalition with liberal Democrats became a major issue of debate with the Socialist Workers Party. The SWP brought out a special "Education for Socialists" bulletin titled, *Alliances and the Revolutionary Party: The Tactic of the United Front and How It Differs from the Popular Front*. That bulletin published the first two chapters of a 1937 SWP pamphlet by James Burnham, *The Popular Front: The New Betrayal*.

Partly in response to this, the Spartacist League youth group at the time (the Revolutionary Communist Youth) published the special bulletin *On the United Front* devoted to explaining why NPAC was a popular front. The SL/RCY bulletin reprinted the last chapter of the Burnham pamphlet describing how the popular front was applied in the U.S. in the absence of a mass workers party and a developing revolutionary crisis:

"Most significant of all is the application of the People's Front policy to 'anti-war work.' Through a multitude of pacifist organizations, and especially through the directly controlled American League against War and Fascism, the Stalinists aim at the creation of a 'broad, classless, People's Front of all those opposed to war'."

—The People's Front: The New Betrayal

Other articles in the SL/RCY bulletin hammered away at the same theme. *Nowhere* did it say that for a popular front to exist there had to be a mass workers party. On the contrary, the whole point of the polemic was that even at a lower level of development there were popular fronts. A July 1973 statement by the RCY National Bureau declared: "The popular front is a political bloc, which may or may not take the form of a governmental coalition, in which the politics of the working-class component of the bloc are subordinated to the politics of the bourgeoisie, to the defense of the bourgeois state and capitalism." An article by Joseph Seymour in the same bulletin summed up: "Thus NPAC was a non-electoral 'popular front' quite parallel to those set up by the Stalinists 'against war, fascism,' etc. in the 1930s."

While there are numerous references to the NPAC as a popular front throughout this pamphlet, today, grasping at straws to justify their new revisionism, the SL leaders evidently seized on the single reference in the bulletin to NPAC as a "popular-frontist formation." But even that contradicts the SL's new line. The RCY document states that "A descriptive distinction can be drawn between popular-front alliances among two or more separate political parties (e.g., the French Union of the Left) and popular-frontist groups" such as NPAC. Not only does this emphasize that there is only a "descriptive" difference, the document goes on to emphasize: "The attitude of Trotskyists, of course, is no different toward these socially weaker popular-frontist formations." Yet today the SL/ICL leaders make a *political* distinction between a popular front and a "popular-frontist formation" in order to insist that there can't be a popular front in the U.S. because there is no mass reformist workers party.

This is far from terminological hair-splitting. In Mexico, where this is an immediate, burning question, the ICL leadership insists on the absence of a popular front precisely because they want to have a different policy than in the past—they don't want to fight the Cardenista popular front, they don't call on workers to break from it, and so they say it doesn't exist. In order to justify their generalizing policy of abstentionism, they are renouncing their own past positions, one after another. Or did the senior leaders of the SL/U.S. who told us this just make it up in order to wiggle out of a tight spot? We doubt it, but let's hear it from the horse's mouth. Where does the SL/ICL stand today: was NPAC a popular front, or what? ■

Declaration of International Fraction

Permanent Revolution Faction

Following the 1996 expulsions of leaders and long-time cadres of the International Communist League in the Spartacist League/U.S. and the Grupo Espartaquista de México, a fight broke out in the French section of the ICL the next year. It was set off by a statement by the International Secretariat that the ICL would no longer pursue an "Iskra perspective" towards North Africa – i.e., to lay the basis for future sections by publishing a newspaper abroad as the Bolsheviks did with their paper, Iskra (The Spark). A Permanent Revolution Faction (FRP) was formed in protest against this abandonment of a strategic perspective and over the series of revisions of key Trotskyist programmatic positions by the ICL in the course of combating the Internationalist Group. The following is an excerpt from the Declaration of the FRP, which was expelled from the Ligue Trotskyiste de France in January 1998. It is reprinted from The Internationalist No. 5, April-May 1998.

Paris

19 December 1997

VII) The New Line of the I.S. on Mexico: Denial of the Popular Front and Prostration Before the PRD!

If in France the I.S. [International Secretariat] was dead set against our proposal to intervene in the truckers strike³⁹ with propaganda which would provide an axis for struggle by the strikers and the advanced elements of the working class to confront and break with the popular front, before that in Mexico the I.S. simply resolved this contradiction by denying that there is a popular front around the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution). The latter had won the post of governor of the federal district (Mexico City), which it has just occupied, and made a strong showing in the chamber of deputies without our Mexican section lifting its little finger. Why fight against the popular front if the I.S. has decided that it doesn't exist?!

Mexico is another case where the abstentionist policy of the I.S. goes hand in hand with the brazen revision not only of a position defended by the ICL for the last decade, but of elementary principles of the Trotskyist program regarding popular fronts. An I.S. motion of 28 June 1997 declared that: "The IG's formulation that the Mexican Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)—a bourgeois nationalist party—is a popular front, or in the leadership of a popular front, is false because there is no mass workers party that exists in that coun-

try," and because the proletariat "has historically remained subordinate to bourgeois nationalism."

First, to put matters in their proper place, the formulation that the PRD is at the head of a popular front was a unique position of the ICL until quite recently—i.e., for nearly ten years—and one can't dispose of that by trying to impute it solely to the IG, deducing that because the IG defends this point (which moreover is part of the programmatic heritage of the ICL), therefore this point is intrinsically false.

Secondly, it took the I.S. ten years to recognize that there is no mass workers party in Mexico, which certainly gives us an idea of the interest that the current elements of this body pay to what goes on on the other side of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo. And let no one say that for ten years another line was carried because a certain Norden slipped it in, since that is a stupid confession by the rest of the international leadership as if it had been hidden from them (once again) that there was no mass workers party in Mexico! Fortunately, ridicule doesn't kill, since the Mexican masses would certainly have laughed in the I.S.'s face if its lucubrations on the popular front didn't involve very serious questions, where the struggle for the class independence of the Mexican proletariat is at stake, and where it is a matter of life and death for the future of the Mexican revolution and beyond that throughout the Americas.

Thirdly, we can cite a host of examples where our International spoke of popular fronts in semi-colonial countries, where the permanent revolution applied,

³⁹ In November 1997, French truck drivers staged a nationwide strike of over-the-road freight that tied up highways throughout the country. The LTF, consulting with the I.S., refused to put out a leaflet to present a perspective of class struggle to bring down the popular-front government of Socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin. See "Tuckers Blockade France," *The Internationalist* No. 4, January-February 1998.

where there “is no mass workers party,” and where the proletariat “has historically remained subordinate to bourgeois nationalism.” So where was the mass workers party in El Salvador, the indispensable element for a popular front according to the new version? Or is it the case, according to the I.S., that our tendency hoodwinked not only the Mexican workers for almost a decade but also the Salvadoran workers in the midst of a civil war, by insisting that they must break with the popular front? Going through the pages of *Le Bolchévik* and *WV*, we find that we characterized the FMLN/FDR as a popular front. And when Reagan visited France and met Mitterrand in June 1982, one of the slogans of the LTF was “El Salvador: Break the Popular Front!” (*Le Bolchévik* No. 33, May 1982). This demand was vehemently contested by the Pabloites at the time, when the LCR saw itself as the fourth component of Mitterrand’s popular-front majority.

We could cite other examples like Bolivia in 1952 and 1970-71, where our International attacked Lora’s POR for its support to the popular front, i.e., its alliance with a supposed anti-imperialist wing of the army and of the Bolivian bourgeoisie. Even in Algeria where there was and is no mass workers party, where the union movement is still under the baton of the nationalists and the military, where the proletariat “has historically remained subordinate to bourgeois nationalism,” we said in the January 1992 *Le Bolchévik*, referring to a demonstration called by the FFS [Front of Socialist Forces, a bourgeois party based in the Berber regions], that it was “supported by a broad class-collaborationist coalition, a popular front, the National Committee to Save Algeria, bringing together the UGTA union federation, which has long been and still remains partially controlled by the FLN, the employers associations of the private and public sector, and the Stalinist party (PAGS).” At the same time, we ferociously attacked the (Pabloite) PST when it wanted to put together an FOP (Workers and People’s Front), i.e., a class-collaborationist coalition, in other words, a *popular front*.

Thus we have the proof that long-held positions of the ICL are now being systematically revised, and this is accompanied by a revisionism which therefore necessarily affects positions developed by Trotsky. The latter talked about the existence of popular fronts in countries of belated capitalist development, and he was far from renouncing the theory of permanent revolution—quite the opposite. In a discussion of problems of Latin America (4 November 1938), Trotsky characterized in this way Chiang Kai-shek’s Guomintang [KMT], Lázaro Cárdenas’ Party of the Mexican Revolution [PRM], and the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance [APRA]—which are all bourgeois parties: “The Kuomintang in China, the PRM in Mexico, and

the APRA in Peru are very similar organizations. It is the People’s Front in the form of a party.” You can’t accuse Trotsky of paying tribute here to the “myth of ‘workers and peasants parties’” or “the bloc of four classes” [as the ICL leadership wrote of the IG]. The popular front can be built around certain bourgeois parties in the absence of mass reformist workers parties. Even when he defined the PRM as a “People’s Front in the form of a party,” Trotsky noted (January 1939) that “At the present time in Mexico there is no workers party, no trade union that is in the process of developing independent class politics and that is able to launch an independent candidate.”

Barbara, in her 14 June 1997 report, notes a point from Jim [Robertson] that “class collaboration is as old as the existence of classes themselves, whereas the popular front is but one specific historical expression of class collaboration, in the period between the 1935 Seventh [Comintern] Congress and the Hitler-Stalin pact.” The I.S. motion of 28 June 1997 explains that this is “a particular form of class collaboration, in which a bourgeois workers party, linked up to the liberal wing of the bourgeoisie, seeks to head off the threat of proletarian power.” A lot of centrists have used similar arguments. Thus in order to justify its support to the popular front and its vote for Mitterrand, one of the arguments of *Pouvoir Ouvrier*, was that we were not in the presence of a popular front because this was characteristic of the late 1930s when such coalitions were put in place to head off the development of a revolutionary situation. This kind of argument, which seeks to limit the scope of a concept to the strict limits of its first appearance, was used by the Mandelites who insisted that Pabloism was only capitulation to the Stalinists like Pablo did in the 1950s.

Ever since Cárdenas broke with the PRI and stood for election as president in 1988 with the support of the left, opposition unions and student organizations, etc., the ICL warned the workers, peasants, women and all the oppressed against the new popular front, and called on them to break with it. Thus in July 1988 we wrote in a superhead in *Workers Vanguard* No. 456, “Left Peddles ‘Unity’ with Cárdenas Popular Front.” In the following issue we said in another article: “The Cárdenas popular front seeks to channel the massive discontent into the framework of bourgeois politics. Its aim is to restore credibility for pro-imperialist capitalist rule in Mexico.” Similarly, at the time of the 1994 elections in Mexico, *WV* [No. 604] of 5 August 1994 reproduced a supplement to *Espartaco* (back when the GEM put out propaganda against class collaboration) which notably said in big letters, “No to Cárdenas Popular Front! For a Revolutionary Workers Party!”

The role of the popular front headed by the PRD is to erect a dike to contain the popular anger and mobilizations of the working class, as well as poor and landless peasants, women and indigenous Indians. PRD wall slogans in 1994 proclaimed: “Neither marches nor demonstrations, Cuauhtémoc will offer solutions.” To accomplish this, the PRD gathered around itself a popular front, receiving the support and subordination of union bureaucrats, reformist and centrist parties, Zapatistas whose bullets were turned into ballots for the PRD, and groups of poor peasants in the countryside. This is what our International denounced for years, but has stopped saying.

In the last elections, some union leaders were also “external candidates” presented by the PRD, i.e., candidates who were not members of the PRD. These candidates came from precisely those unions which had been active in their opposition to the corporatist control of the workers movement by the PRI, and which adhered to the Cárdenas popular front. The popular front around Cárdenas controls the unions which have broken with the rigidly PRI-controlled corporatist CTM (Mexican Workers Federation). Thus it chains sections of the working class, the peasantry and radicalized youth to a so-called “anti-imperialist,” “democratic” and “progressive” wing of the bourgeoisie, in order to better defend capitalism and ensure the interests of the imperialists and their local valets, and to prepare a bloody defeat for the working class and all the oppressed, as was the case in Chile. Today our International no longer warns the Mexican workers of this danger, thanks to the so-called absence of the popular front!

One of the arguments on which we have based ourselves, since 1988, in saying that there is a popular front around Cárdenas is the miserable support that he receives from the whole spectrum of the Mexican “left.” This support can be electoral as well as trade-union in nature, or in the form of a pressure bloc: from the Stalinists to the partisans of Ted Grant’s Militant group (and including a part of the Pabloists), all of whom liquidated into the PRD, to organizations such as the Morenoite POS-Z, their LTS offshoot (currently linked with Workers Power) and the pro-USec LUS. The latter three groups, while not having voted for the PRD in the last elections, nevertheless have capitulated to the PRD in practice. They did not call on the workers to break with the PRD, nor to vote against it, but called instead to cast a blank ballot in order to avoid appearing as electoral sponsors for Cárdenas, freshly returned from Wall Street. On the other hand, in the “autonomous” unions they don’t hesitate to offer themselves up as brokers for the popular front. The PRT, formed by Mexican supporters of the USec, not

only supported the PRD but even presented a candidate (who was elected) on the PRD slate, and had election posters supporting Cárdenas which included the symbol of their party and that of the PRD. In the September 1997 issue of *Inprecor*, a PRT resolution stated: “the PRT is thus part of an electoral alliance with the PRD and various social and civic organizations,” and that “for the PRT the question is posed of eventual participation in the Cárdenas government.”

After all that, those who refuse to see that there is a popular front led by the PRD might as well not have any eyes at all. Because the role of a Trotskyist vanguard worthy of the name is to show to the working class the dangers of the popular front and to fight for the class independence of the proletariat, for it to break with this class-collaborationist alliance, so that it can take the leadership of all the oppressed masses for the conquest of power. Permanent revolution is not a compilation of verbose phrases, but begins with this concrete struggle for the class independence of the proletariat, not only breaking the corporatist stranglehold of the PRI but also breaking with the popular front around Cárdenas.

After having called upon Mexican workers for a decade to break with the popular front led by Cárdenas, and at the precise moment of the victory of the latter in last July’s elections in Mexico City, the I.S. stopped putting forward this slogan. Yet it isn’t the nature of the PRD that changed, nor the popular-front policy of the entire spectrum of the Mexican “left.” What has changed is the policy of the I.S., which now spits on the fights that our international waged in the past. But why does the I.S. insist that there is not and cannot be a popular front around the PRD? The new line is the pretext for an abstentionist policy. In denying the existence of this popular front, the political struggle to break the proletariat and the oppressed from the Cárdenas popular front is swept under the rug. With this subterfuge, the ICL leadership has proven again that it is not at all interested in the struggle to provide a revolutionary leadership for the working class. It’s not surprising that the GEM didn’t have a leaflet or any other kind of propaganda at the time of the last elections in Mexico. Either the “battle” against Negrete and Socorro⁴⁰ cut them off from the real world and its struggles, to sink into suicidal navel-gazing, or they learned early on the lesson drawn by the I.S. and the LTF leadership in France that “you have to know how to stop a leaflet”!...

⁴⁰ In 1996 two key leaders of the Mexican section of the ICL were summoned to New York for a “trial” on trumped up charges, and then expelled. Negrete and Socorro then became founding members of the Internationalist Group.

Introduction...

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outcome will not be the reformists' utopia of gradual improvement for the masses – impossible in the long run under imperialism, the epoch of capitalist decay. Instead, as the workers are beaten down by their own leaders and organizations, the popular front opens the door to reaction, whether a victory by fascist forces, the imposition of a police-state regime, and/or the massive destruction of workers' gains.

This issue goes back to the dawn of the 20th century, when reformist workers leaders first accepted offers of cabinet positions from the ruling class, while revolutionaries such as Rosa Luxemburg denounced “ministerial socialism” (see “From Millerand to Mitterrand... Popular Front Chains the Workers,” page 41). In the 1920s, social democrats in France, Britain and elsewhere entered into coalition governments in order to stave off the “Bolshevik threat” of red revolution. By the mid-1930s, frightened out of their wits by Hitler's victory in Germany (which they paved the way for), Stalin and his henchmen joined the social democrats in embracing “coalitionism” with the bourgeoisie, rebaptised the “People's Front Against Fascism.”

As the Soviet Union degenerated under a conservative, nationalist bureaucracy, Stalin formally junked the program of world socialist revolution under which Lenin and Trotsky carried out the October Revolution. Stalin's new formula was to build “*socialism in one country*.” The *popular front* was its international counterpart: vainly seeking “peaceful coexistence” with imperialism the Kremlin would put a lock on revolutionary struggle elsewhere. In Spain, France and elsewhere, the Stalinist parties sabotaged revolutionary opportunities and beheaded potential revolutionary leaderships.

The popular front again became an issue in the 1970s as U.S. imperialism was bogged down in its losing war in Vietnam. In Chile, the Unidad Popular government of Salvador Allende awakened great hopes among the working people. But rather than warning of the danger that the UP would lead to a counterrevolutionary bloodbath when the workers had become demoralized, many self-proclaimed Trotskyist groups supported the Allende coalition, either directly and enthusiastically, or by subterfuges such as voting for the “workers parties of the popular front.”

Despite the horrifying lesson of the 11 September 1973 Pinochet coup d'état in Chile, which wiped out or exiled a generation of socialists, many ostensible Trotskyists in France voted the next year for the popular front candidate, François Mitterrand, who eventually won in 1981 and presided over bourgeois governments of the left and right until 1992. As the “far left” marched in lockstep with the Cold War socialist Mitterrand in proclaiming “solidarity with Solidarność” in Poland and denouncing Soviet intervention in Afghanistan against CIA-backed Islamic fundamentalists, Mitterrand's cabinets began dismantling labor gains “at home.”

Unlike various ostensible Trotskyists who “peddled their wares in the shadow of the popular front,” as Trotsky trenchantly described the centrists of his day, the Spartacist tendency (currently the International Communist League) uniquely called for no vote to any candidate of a class-collaborationist coalition. But under the blows of the capitalist counterrevolution that destroyed the Soviet degenerated workers state and the bureaucratically deformed workers states of East Europe in 1989-92, the ICL internalized that world historic defeat. It carried out purges in the United States, Mexico and France and began rewriting its program.

One of the first planks to be affected concerned the popular front. No self-respecting opportunist is going to hop on the popular-front bandwagon right away, of course; instead, they come up with justifications for why Trotsky's program doesn't apply *here*. In the 1970s, the Argentine pseudo-Trotskyist Nahuel Moreno justified a policy of pressuring Allende's Chilean UP by claiming that you can only have popular fronts in imperialist countries. In Europe in the '70s and '80s, the followers of Ernest Mandel argued that the popular front was specific to the 1930s. Now the ICL asserts that you can't have popular fronts in countries that lack a mass workers party, like the United States and most of Latin America, Asia and Africa.

The Internationalist Group and the League for the Fourth International continued to uphold Trotsky's program of proletarian opposition to popular frontism. We noted that the ICL's new line went against years of Spartacist propaganda against popular frontism in Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Algeria and elsewhere in the “Third World,” not to mention its sharp attacks on antiwar pop fronts in the U.S. We pointed out that Trotsky himself spoke of popular fronts and popular frontism in India, China, Latin America and the U.S. And we underlined that revolutionaries must fight to break the mass organizations of the working class from these political blocs with bourgeois sectors or else new defeats are already in the works.

Currently, the press of the IG and LFI include a number of articles on the danger of the popular front in Brazil, Mexico (particularly around the explosive struggles in Oaxaca), France, the Philippines and elsewhere. In this bulletin we have collected several key articles and excerpts from Trotsky on the popular front; articles and documents from the ICL when it stood for revolutionary Trotskyism (most of them written by comrades who went on to found the IG); and several older articles from *The Internationalist*.

From Spain and France in the 1930s to Greece, Italy and France in the '40s, Indonesia in the '60s, Chile and Portugal in the '70s, France in the '80s and in Mexico today, the popular front spells bitter defeat for the exploited and oppressed . . . unless it is brought down through workers revolution, as in Russia in October 1917.

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