

# MARXIST LEFT REVIEW

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## Australian imperialism and the rise of China

**Australian imperialism and the rise of China**  
Tom Bramble looks at the rise of China and considers the conflicts for Australian imperialism poked between making the most of China's booming growth and remaining loyal to the US, which sees China as a potential threat to their imperialist domination.

**The Arab Springs revolution and counter-revolution**  
The Arab revolutions continue. Sandra Bloodworth looks at the early of counter-revolution and discusses the political questions and challenges for the left posed by these momentous events.

**Overpopulation or overblown lies?**  
Allyson Hese exposes the racist core of arguments which blame 'overpopulation' for environmental crisis and exposes the population panic as based on lies. She shows that the world could support many more billions of people and lays the blame for environmental degradation on the relentless drive for profit at the heart of capitalism.

**Dealing with climate change**  
Liz Ross shows that Labor's carbon tax is rather different to the carbon tax which she would like to see. She argues that the government needs to take steps to make workers pay for their crisis support by a 10% increase in wages and some on the left for such a ruling class. She also argues that the government should take steps to deal with climate change which to be part of a wider struggle to defend workers' living standards.

**Jim Cairns: the tragedy of relying on imperialist  
fundamental change**

Jim Cairns was a sincere socialist. He was one of the most important revolutionary leaders in the history of the Australian left. He was a man of great courage and integrity. He was a man who was not afraid to speak his mind. He was a man who was not afraid to stand up to the powerful. He was a man who was not afraid to die for his beliefs.

**Revolutionary strategy and the united front**  
The Arab Spring has shown us that the world is not what we thought it was. It has shown us that the world is full of potential. It has shown us that the world is full of people who are ready to fight for a better world. It has shown us that the world is full of people who are ready to fight for a better world. It has shown us that the world is full of people who are ready to fight for a better world.

**The Arab Spring: revolution and  
counter-revolution**  
**Jim Cairns and the limits of parliamentarism**  
**Revolutionary strategy and the united front**

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## Revolutionary tactics, the united front and what we do today

**RICK KUHN**

The working class is the only force which has both an interest in and the capacity to overturn capitalism and build a new society. The higher the level of working class consciousness, the better the prospect that its campaigns for changes within the framework of capitalism will strengthen a movement against the system and that both will be successful. Since Marx and Engels, Marxists have, as they intervened in struggles against exploitation and oppression, sought to win others to their views, by arguing, writing, speaking and building organisations. As the *Communist Manifesto* put it, Communists

are on the one hand practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties<sup>1</sup> of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the lines of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.

and

The Communists fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of that movement.<sup>2</sup>

So convincing workers about revolutionary politics has to be at the heart of Marxist strategy.

There are no infallible tactics that are the right way to pursue the strategy of working class revolution, at all times and in all situations. Nevertheless, it is difficult to conceive of a contribution that some

approaches to political change could make to this strategy. Acts of terror by individuals or small groups are never likely to contribute to working class self-confidence or to reinforce the case for working class self-emancipation. On the other hand, Marx and Engels won over the League of the Just by means that had already been used for centuries and have been employed by Marxists ever since. We may use telephones, email and the web but we still engage in individual discussions and debates, participate in formal and informal meetings, and exchange position papers and correspondence.

Then there are tactics that may be appropriate in some circumstances and not others. In many situations, small socialist groups are likely to waste their time and energy by running for public office. But, in a bourgeois democracy, a mass revolutionary organisation would lose credibility and miss opportunities to reach a wider working class audience by abstaining from elections. Mick Armstrong has demonstrated how building a propaganda group has been a crucial tactic for small numbers of revolutionaries who have developed Marxist politics, recruited new adherents and paved the way for mass revolutionary parties. It was pursued, for example, by Marx and Engels among German workers inside and outside Germany between 1845 and 1848; Chinese Communists from 1921; Vietnamese Trotskyists from 1931; and the Socialist Review Group/International Socialists in Britain from 1950.<sup>3</sup> While political clarity and propaganda work are also vital for large revolutionary organisations, a mass Marxist party will be able to recruit not simply on the basis of its ideas but also, to a much greater extent than a group of a few dozen or even a couple of thousand members, because it can initiate action on a substantial scale. The tactic of open political work has been pursued by Marxists since 1847. But not always. As socialist revolution can only be achieved through the activity of the working class itself and Marxists want to win over as many people as possible to this cause, the *Manifesto* stressed that "Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions."<sup>4</sup> Yet, when socialist ideas and organisations are illegal, this orientation does not oblige Marxists to notify the authorities about their activity. While a workers' revolution is not a putsch or conspiracy, conspiratorial tactics may sometimes be a practical necessity if revolutionaries are to survive and expand their influence.

This article examines some of the tactics that Marxists have used to relate to other forces on the left, in order to cast light on how a

revolutionary organisation can be effective today. At most, it only deals in passing with certain tactics, most importantly the way Marxists have set up and operated in trade unions, but also how they have structured their own organisations (at all levels, from individual workplaces to the whole planet), stood for public office and behaved in parliaments, the role of revolutionary newspapers, relations with the rank and file of armed forces, and a multitude of other practices. Given that a particular point of this discussion is to draw some conclusions relevant to socialists in Australia, it concentrates on the experience of revolutionaries in developed countries.

The first section below considers the tactics developed by Marx and Engels during the German revolution of 1848-49. The following section deals with their later political activities and, very briefly, the approach of the Second International, before the approach of the Bolsheviks to united action on the left is considered. The fourth section, which examines the theory and practice of the united front, provides a more detailed account for two reasons. The experience of the early Communist movement provides important lessons, positive and negative, about the relations between revolutionaries and other left forces. The term "united front" is therefore worth clarifying as it has been used to refer to many different tactics. In everyday language, it can refer to any form of unity. For example, Chris Harman, who used the words very precisely in other contexts, described an alliance of fascist and reactionary forces in Germany in 1923 as a "united front against the left".<sup>5</sup> For radicals it has also had a narrower, though still very loose meaning of unity for limited purposes amongst leftwingers with different views.<sup>6</sup> "United front" was used in the Third International (Comintern) after the Russian revolution to describe any form of joint action between revolutionaries and non-revolutionaries. But it also referred to a more specific approach to winning over social democratic workers. Sections five to seven deal with other tactics during the 1920s, Trotsky's discussion of the united front in the early 1930s, and Trotskyists' later tactic of entering social democratic parties. Section eight looks at tactics that some far left groups used as levels of class struggle revived during the 1960s and 1970s and in the subsequent downturn. The final section assesses some ways in which revolutionaries have recently responded to new situations.

## 1. Marx and Engels in the 1848 revolution

For the first and only times in their lives, Marx and Engels participated directly in a revolution during 1848-49. Uprisings broke out across Germany in the wake of the February revolution in France. These insurrections brought down governments but not the monarchs who had appointed them.

Already in 1847, Marx and Engels had argued that the German bourgeoisie, too fearful of the emergent proletariat, would not play a revolutionary role in the social conflicts ahead. On the other hand, the working class was still too small and fragmented to overturn the old order by itself. Instead they believed a class alliance – “the Democracy” – of workers, small peasants and the petty bourgeoisie, led by the working class, could make a democratic revolution. This bloc would fight against both the feudal order and its bourgeois supporters for demands that cleared the way for the Communists’ own, more radical program. On the model of the great French revolution of 1789-94, they regarded a “single, indivisible, democratic...republic” as, for the time being, the best possible outcome in Germany. With “freedom of the press, association and assembly” such a state would provide the most favourable circumstances for the development of the working class and its political organisations.<sup>7</sup>

Marx, Engels and their allies in the Communist League returned to Germany with the intention of implementing the perspective expressed in the *Communist Manifesto* and modified for specifically German conditions in the frequently reissued leaflet “Demands of the communist party in Germany” of March 1848. The demands included universal male suffrage, payment of parliamentarians, arming of the people, nationalisation of the property of feudal aristocrats and the means of transport and communications, limitation of inheritance rights, steep income taxes, abolition of consumption taxes, state-guaranteed livelihood for all workers and those who could not work, and universal free education.<sup>8</sup>

They were frantically active and based their operations in Köln (Cologne), the centre of the most economically and socially developed province of Germany. On 1 June 1848, they began publishing the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung (New Rhineland Newspaper, NRZ)* subtitled “Organ of the democracy”, that is of the radical democratic current in Germany, a major daily, with Marx as editor-in-chief. The NRZ uncompromisingly demanded the deepening of the revolution which had succeeded in extracting reforms from Germany’s rulers without, so far, overthrowing

them. Kings, electors, princes, archdukes, dukes, a landgrave and mayors of free cities, with their privileges and hangers-on, still ruled fractured Germany, from Berlin to Cologne, to Stuttgart, to Vienna. Not only in Cologne but throughout the Rhine province and across the country the NRZ provided leadership for the radical wing of the revolutionary struggle. While the French working class unsuccessfully rose up in late June 1848, Marx and Engels still believed that workers’ revolution was not yet possible in Germany, because the country was still too backward and its working class too small and uninfluential.<sup>9</sup>

The perspective of democratic revolution had organisational implications. The Communist League members who had returned from abroad to Cologne in April 1848, including Marx and Engels, divided their energies among the local Democratic and Workers’ Associations, and the NRZ. They initially hoped that members of the Communist League in other cities would set up or participate in existing open workers’ associations and, given the still uncertain political situation, also underground branches of the League. By these means the League would be able to coordinate independent working class action across Germany. Members would, at the same time, work with petty bourgeois democrats. Particularly in Cologne, there was close collaboration between the Workers’ and Democratic Associations, but Marx and his associates insisted that the workers had to maintain their own separate organisation to serve their distinct class interests.

League members did initiate and often led workers’ associations in several cities. But their forces were too small and dispersed for the League to play an effective role across Germany. For the time being, it was dissolved. Instead, the group around Marx in Cologne attempted to influence German events through the NRZ and informal relations with Communists and radical democrats in other cities. Marx initially concentrated his efforts on the NRZ and the Democratic Association. Other Communists were more active in the Workers’ Association, which had a membership of around 5,000.<sup>10</sup>

In response to the Prussian government’s repressive measures against the revolution, the Cologne Workers’ Association, Democratic Association and NRZ called a mass meeting for noon on 13 September. The thousands present elected a Committee of Public Safety to lead the defence of the revolution. Among the Committee’s thirty members were Marx and Engels. Delegations from other towns in the Rhineland participated in a subsequent meeting of 8000, whose secretary was Engels, which endorsed the Committee.

When the police cracked down on the left in Cologne, many communists, including Engels, were forced to leave town to avoid arrest. Marx, who remained, warned meetings of the Workers' and Democratic Associations that the time was not ripe for an uprising. The Workers' Association organised further activity, including a large rally on 15 October. Although reluctant because of his other commitments, a week later, Marx was elected president of the Workers' Association which expanded its activities to nearby towns and the countryside.

In November, Marx led a campaign in Cologne, endorsed by the Prussian Assembly in Berlin, against payment of taxes to the reactionary Prussian government. The NRZ and Democratic Association in Cologne and the Democratic district committee in the Rhineland promoted the movement which included mass meetings and large demonstrations. But the German National Assembly in Frankfurt disowned the struggle and the Prussian King dissolved the Prussian Assembly. The campaign subsided and the counter-revolution gained confidence.

In 1849, Marx and Engels increasingly put their efforts into the Workers' Association, particularly by helping to extend its propaganda activities through public lectures. For this reason, the Communists resigned from the Democratic district committee on 14 April 1849. A few days later the Workers' Association decided to disaffiliate from the Democratic Association and to organise a conference of workers in the Rhineland and Westphalia, and eventually a national workers' conference. The NRZ likewise reoriented to focus more on the working class. The new approach, one of permanent revolution, identified workers' revolution in Western Europe as the only means to overturn the absolutist regime in Germany.<sup>11</sup>

There was another wave of uprisings in May 1849, after the Prussian government rejected the constitution drafted by the Frankfurt Assembly and moved onto the offensive. Engels went to support the revolt in Elberfeld, organising a unit of revolutionary workers in Solingen on the way. Several days after putting him in charge of fortifications and artillery, the Elberfeld Committee of Public Safety had second thoughts. It was more afraid of his socialist politics and armed workers than the powerful military forces of the counter-revolution and asked him and, soon after, the workers' units from nearby towns, to leave.

Already defeated in the Habsburg lands in October 1848, the revolution was suppressed in other parts of Germany between May and July 1849. *The address of the Central Committee to the Communist League* spelt out the lessons that Marx and Engels drew from the experience of the revolution in greater detail in March 1850. Their initial

tactical perspective for Germany was one of democratic revolution, as a step towards workers' revolution. They tried out a range of specific tactics including building workers' and democratic associations, publishing a newspaper, public meetings, public lectures, the committee of public safety, the campaign against paying taxes and agitation amongst the peasantry. But Marx abandoned the notion of a democratic revolution and formulated a new, broad tactical framework for action, that of permanent revolution, in which workers should organise independently and lead the revolution towards an outright challenge to capitalism. Leon Trotsky, in particular, was to develop this idea further early in the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Marx's tactics in quieter times

Under conditions of political reaction and economic growth between the early 1850s and early 1860s, Marx and Engels were only involved in active politics to a limited extent. In 1855, Marx, together with his friend and fellow exile Wilhelm Liebknecht, participated as ordinary protesters rather than organisers in two demonstrations in Hyde Park. The rallies were directed against a bill restricting shop trading hours on Sundays. It sought to discipline the unruly habits of the working classes into god-fearing church-attendance. The demonstrations, in the midst of the unpopular Crimean War, were very large. The police attacked protesters, who jeered at the toffs promenading on horseback and in carriages through Hyde Park, for their impiety. The bill was withdrawn, and the heated protests proved to be exceptional in the cool political climate of England in the 1850s.<sup>13</sup> During the following decade, the level of social conflict in Europe and the United States rose. Marx helped organise meetings to build solidarity among English workers with the Polish uprising of 1863 and the anti-slavery forces during the civil war in the United States.<sup>14</sup>

From its foundation in 1864 until 1872, Marx, Engels and their allies were active in the International Working Men's Association (IWMA), which united the English trade unions of skilled workers, working class followers of Proudhon in France and Switzerland with workers' associations and unions in many other countries. Although the Association was not Marxist, it proclaimed the fundamental Marxist principle that "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves" and promoted the expansion and coordination of working class organisation on that

basis.<sup>15</sup> The International demanded that the state regulate hours and conditions of work and adopted other positions that reflected Marx's analysis rather than the approach of the Proudhonist anarchists. The International also exposed a large working class audience across Europe and beyond to Marxist ideas. As a tactic, the involvement of Marx and Engels and their tiny group of close collaborators in the IWMA proved to be very successful.

The IWMA organised international solidarity with workers' struggles. A central concern was to provide practical aid for workers in conflict with employers over wages and conditions. From the start, the International also took up other political questions. The IWMA and Marx personally participated in political campaigns that involved wider forces. As socialists had before and have since, their tactics included participation in or setting up movements, campaigns and committees. These were intended to achieve desirable reforms, promote struggles, spread their ideas and build their own organisations. Members of the International in London, for example, sought to mobilise people around the Polish freedom fight against Russia and the other occupying empires; the campaign of the Fenians against the British occupation of Ireland; and electoral reform in Britain.

With Marx's encouragement and advice, the English union officials who had taken a lead in establishing the International set up the Reform League in February 1865 to agitate for universal suffrage. Moderates, including some union officials, gained a majority in the League's Central Council and expressed support for the Liberal government's Reform Bill which included only a marginal extension of the right to vote. When the Bill failed and Gladstone's government fell, the League revived and spearheaded an extensive movement that included mass protests across the country. To the embarrassment of the League's mild leadership, there were three days of fighting between militant supporters of reform and police after a huge demonstration was refused access to Hyde Park on 22 July 1866.<sup>16</sup> This pressure pushed the Tories to pass an Act that went well beyond the Liberals' proposal but still fell far short of universal male suffrage.

Meanwhile in Germany, workers' associations, sponsored by bourgeois liberals, emerged in the early 1860s. The liberals were keen to broaden their support base in a conflict over the future of Germany with the prime minister of authoritarian Prussia, Otto von Bismarck. The substantial workers' association movement gave rise to two socialist workers' parties. Dissatisfied with liberal politics and patronage, radicals in several associations turned to Ferdinand Lassalle, a

prominent lawyer and veteran of the 1848 revolution with working class sympathies, for advice and leadership. The *Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein* (General German Workers' Association, ADAV), which he helped found in 1863, was the first workers' party in Germany. Lassalle had contact with Marx. But, in stark contrast to Marx's commitment to democracy in the workers' movement, the independence of working class organisations and workers' struggles, Lassalle insisted on dictatorial powers in running the ADAV, regarded the Prussian state under Bismarck as a potential ally and was hostile to trade union activity.

On returning to Germany, Marx's friend Liebknecht joined the ADAV in 1863 and opposed Lassalle's orientation. He did not attempt and probably did not have the capacity to cohere a core of worked-out Marxists in the German workers' associations. The absence of such a cadre had consequences for the politics of the socialist movement in Germany over decades. Expelled from the ADAV in 1865, Liebknecht moved from Berlin to Leipzig.<sup>17</sup>

There he entered into a political partnership with August Bebel, a wood turner, who was already a leading member of the *Verband Deutscher Arbeitervereine* (Union of German Workers' Associations, VDAV) which had not yet broken with the liberals. At this point Bebel was shifting from a liberal to a Marxist outlook. In 1868, under Bebel's influence, the VDAV adopted the principles of the IWMA. The following year, the Union formed the core of the new *Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei* (Social Democratic Workers' Party, SDAP), with around 10,000 members, and a program that was inspired by the principles of the IWMA. Between 1866 and 1869 Bebel and Liebknecht had also been leaders of the Saxon People's Party. Much to Marx's and Engels' irritation, this party unnecessarily recapitulated experiences and failures of their own efforts to create a common organisation of working class militants and petty bourgeois radicals in 1848-49. Given their reservations about Liebknecht's political judgement and opposition to the People's Party tactic, Marx and Engels had tried to maintain cordial relations with both socialist currents in the German workers' movement. After the dominant working class wing abandoned the People's Party, they were closer to the SDAP even though its self-professedly Marxist leaders, frustratingly, did not always act on their advice.

The defeat of the Paris Commune, the first workers' state in history, in 1871 was followed by the repression of working class organisations in much of Europe. Wrecked by internal divisions, after 1872 the



IWMA ceased to operate as an effective international link amongst workers. In the face of shared oppression by Bismarck's regime and convergence in practical politics, the ADAV and SDAP merged in Gotha to form the Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei (Socialist Workers Party) in 1875. Marx and Engels regarded this fusion as desirable, in principle, but were very critical of the new Gotha program. They told the leaders of the SDAP that it made unacceptable and unnecessary concessions to Lassallean ideas, particularly about the state, other social classes, trade unions and internationalism.<sup>18</sup>

Over the following decades, mass workers' parties emerged in other countries. They and smaller socialist organisations participated in the Socialist or Second International, which began with a conference in 1889. It was a loose federation and included non-Marxist parties, such as the Independent Labour Party in Britain; the populist Social Revolutionaries (SRs), oriented towards the peasantry, in Russia as well as the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) and eventually both its Bolshevik and Menshevik currents; and the nationalist Polish Socialist Party and its allies in partitioned Poland. Renamed the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) after the lapse of Bismarck's anti-socialist law in 1890, German social democracy was the largest party in the International. Many of its members and leaders were not Marxists. At its 1904 congress in Amsterdam, the International encouraged the formation of single socialist parties in each country. Its Bureau soon mediated the unification of the two largest socialist parties in France, to form the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (French Section of the Workers' International, SFIO) in 1905. Both the reformist and orthodox Marxist wings of the SFIO capitulated to nationalism after the outbreak of World War I. Outside Russia and Bulgaria, it was not until World War I that Marxist revolutionaries began to conclude that it was a tactical mistake to build parties that also included forces willing to collaborate with the bourgeoisie.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Bolshevik tactics

Only in the twentieth century did competing radical and moderate political organisations of any substantial size coexist in the labour movement of a single country. Marxist revolutionaries eventually responded to these new circumstances with new tactics.

The Russian Bolsheviks first emerged as an organised current when the Mensheviks, with whom they differed over the requirements of party

membership, refused to abide by the decisions of the 1903 RSDLP congress. Both the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks remained small, overshadowed in membership by the much larger Bund which only organised Jewish workers, until the 1905 revolution in Russia, when both factions became mass organisations with tens of thousands of members. In the same year that French socialists came together in the SFIO, the unity in action that was possible in the course of the revolution persuaded the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and other social democratic currents in the Russian empire to form a single party. Both the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks retained strong factional structures and competed with each other within the same party over ideas and for members.

The defeat of the 1905 revolution and repression resulted in the near collapse of both currents, with little improvement between 1907 and 1911. During this period of reaction, the differences between the factions' political perspectives became much more pronounced. The Mensheviks hoped that the Russian bourgeoisie would lead the struggle against the autocracy; the Bolsheviks recognised the capitalists' cowardice and that a successful democratic revolution could only be led by the working class. The Mensheviks concentrated on legal political activity in unions, insurance societies and elections. Some, the "Liquidators", even rejected the project of building an underground party to coordinate the struggle against the Tsarist police state. The Bolsheviks were involved in legal organisations and led struggles for reforms as a means to both improve workers' conditions and win them to socialist politics. They encouraged militancy, identified the links between immediate demands and the struggle for revolutionary change, and insisted on maintaining a, necessarily underground, organisation explicitly committed to revolutionary politics.

The definitive split took place in January 1912, as the level of workers' struggle in Russia was rising and both factions were starting to become mass organisations again. Still, the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks maintained a joint caucus in the Duma, the toothless Russian parliament, until October 1913. Both parties grew rapidly, especially after 4 April 1912 when police massacred striking miners on the Lena goldfield and provoked large and widespread demonstrations around political demands. During the period to the outbreak of World War I, the Bolsheviks gained more support, members and influence than the Mensheviks, winning the leadership of most unions and workers' insurance societies from them. The Bolsheviks' policies were in tune with the increasingly militant mood of a growing proportion of the

Russian working class. Once the Bolsheviks had won majority support amongst workers, Lenin insisted that organisational unity could only be achieved through Menshevik acceptance of their politics. In practice this was a rejection of the Second International's 1904 resolution on unity, although Lenin fudged the issue. In 1922, as discussed below, a document of the Communist International (Comintern) made a false and misleading argument that this episode was a precedent for contemporary united front policies designed to bring about joint struggles between smaller revolutionary and larger reformist organisations.<sup>20</sup>

The fight against the Kornilov coup in 1917 was a better and more dramatic example of how revolutionaries could act effectively with workers who still supported reformist organisations. In August 1917, General Lavr Georgiyevich Kornilov led his Cossack troops from the front towards Petrograd, with the intention of overturning the Provisional Government that had emerged from the February revolution against the Tsarist regime. The Bolsheviks had recently suffered a severe political setback, because of their participation in ill-timed, armed demonstrations against the regime in July, though support for them was already recovering. Trotsky was in gaol and Lenin was on the run, avoiding an arrest warrant issued by the Provisional Government. In order to defend the rights workers had won in February, the Bolsheviks were enthusiastic about joint resistance, with other workers' organisations, to Kornilov's attempted counter-revolution. Bailed from prison by trade unions, Trotsky went straight into discussions about stopping Kornilov, with Menshevik leaders who supported the government that had locked him up. Workers and radical soldiers – Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, SRs and unaligned – immobilised and then defeated Kornilov's forces. This willingness to participate in joint, practical activity to defend workers' interests helped increase the popularity of the Bolsheviks who soon had the support of the majority of the working class.<sup>21</sup>

Immediately after the collapse of Kornilov's attempted coup, the Bolsheviks proposed to the SRs and Mensheviks that they withdraw support for Kerensky and form a government without the participation of bourgeois parties. In return, the Bolsheviks would, for the time being, refrain from demanding a government based on the soviets. This could have resulted in a regime better disposed to the working class. The offer was not taken up, but the tactic helped win further support for the Bolsheviks who again demonstrated that they were prepared to compromise in order to advance workers' interests.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. The classic united front

World War I and the Bolshevik revolution reshaped the international workers' movement. A radical wing emerged almost everywhere. The new international Communist movement, organised as the Communist or Third International, had to work out how to extend revolutionary class consciousness and, under the right circumstances, lead the working class in successful revolutions. The Comintern was initially a democratic organisation whose decisions were binding on its sections: it was structured as the world party of revolution. The Comintern and its Executive Committee (ECCI) were inevitably dominated by the leaders of the Russian Communist Party. They had been involved in revolutionary politics for many years and had prestige as the architects of a successful revolution, while most of the leaders of other Communist Parties were relatively inexperienced.

Russian advice could help the new parties overcome their lack of experience to some extent. But it could not substitute for years of practical engagement, knowledge of complex immediate circumstances and local initiative that are the stuff of effective political action. Furthermore, through the disproportionate weight of the Russian Party in the Comintern, misassessments of the international situation, particularly by Grigori Zinoviev, the chairperson of the ECCI between 1919 and 1926, the problems faced by the Soviet regime and its degeneration had direct, detrimental effects on the international Communist movement.<sup>23</sup>

An early priority of the Third International was to achieve clear breaks with the policies and orientations of pre-war social democracy, while winning as many workers as possible to the Communists' revolutionary orientation. In France and Italy in particular, established socialist party leaders used revolutionary language and formally went over to the Comintern, without abandoning their previous political practices. The 21 conditions for affiliation to the International, adopted at its second congress in 1920, were an attempt to exclude such "centrists" and ensure that members of its sections were committed to the strategy of workers' revolution. On the other hand, there were relatively small "ultra-left" groups and factions committed to revolution which rejected in principle tactics that were vital means for winning over workers to Communism, notably work in trade unions led by reformists and, especially for larger Communist Parties, participation in parliamentary elections. Lenin's *Leftwing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* sought to convince ultra-lefts, particularly in Britain,

Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, that such tactics could be important.<sup>24</sup> The tumultuous political situation during the last years of the World War and the period immediately following it subsided for a while during the early 1920s, although the level of class struggle remained high. Workers were increasingly involved in defensive fights and Communist Parties could no longer grow simply because they advocated revolution.

Revolutionaries in many countries were in a situation that had few precedents. In Germany, Czechoslovakia, France, Italy and several other European countries, the Communist Parties became mass organisations which competed with even more substantial reformist parties for the leadership of the working class. Elsewhere, the Communist Parties were smaller but still had thousands of members and faced much larger reformist rivals.

Experiences in Germany were crucial for the international Communist movement. In November 1918, a workers' revolution had overturned the monarchy, though not capitalism. Germany had the largest working class in Europe, the largest social democratic party in the world and, by late 1920, the largest Communist Party outside Russia.<sup>25</sup> The Communist Party of Germany (KPD) was established at a conference over New Year 1918-19. A large proportion of its membership was young, politically raw, impatient to make the workers' revolution. Many of these militants ruled out work in trade unions and any form of parliamentary politics, which they associated with the betrayals of the SPD. The new-born KPD participated in the Spartacist Uprising of early January 1919. It was a catastrophe. The radical wing of the labour movement in Berlin and then other centres was savagely repressed; the Party's most effective and experienced leaders, Rosa Luxemburg, who had opposed the insurrection, and Karl Liebknecht were murdered by counter-revolutionary militia units (*Freikorps*). In March Leo Jogiches, another long-term revolutionary who had taken over the effective leadership of the Party, was also killed.

The KPD recovered quite quickly from this setback, as it did from others, because intense social conflicts recurred in Germany until the end of 1923. But it long suffered from the lack of a numerous cadre of experienced and self-confident militants, let alone leaders. Paul Levi, a close associate of Luxemburg, became the chairperson of the Party. He and his allies drove the most ultra-left elements out at its October 1919 conference, opening the way for tactics that allowed the KPD to reach wider layers of workers. For the Party had only around 50,000 members at this time compared with the many hundreds of thousands of workers

in the SPD and the centrist Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) which had broken from the SPD in 1917.

The impatience and inexperience of KPD leaders still led to serious mistakes. In March 1920, while Levi was in jail, the KPD executive initially told members to abstain from the strike campaign by the social democratic union movement which defeated the right wing Kapp Putsch. This position was reversed the following day. The strike wave continued after the collapse of the coup. On Levi's prompting, the Party stated that it could even play the role of loyal opposition if the SPD, USPD and unions formed a government without the participation of bourgeois parties, as Carl Legien, the head of the social democratic unions had suggested. Lenin endorsed this stance when it was criticised by a majority of the KPD's Central Committee and Karl Radek. A leftist journalist in the SPD before World War I, Radek was in Germany for several periods in 1918-20 as a representative of the Russian Communists and then the Comintern.<sup>26</sup>

As the German ruling class attempted to eliminate the concessions made during the revolution of 1918-19, the KPD developed new tactics to win over more workers. In November 1920, Communists in Stuttgart initiated a call in the metal workers' union for united working class action over a series of demands, including measures to improve living standards, reduce unemployment and arm workers. Other union branches took up the appeal, which demonstrated that Communists were prepared to join with members of other workers' organisations to fight for the immediate interests of the working class. This willingness, compared favourably with the rejection of the proposal by the union leadership.

Meanwhile Levi, Zinoviev and the reputation of the Russian revolution succeeded in winning the majority left wing of the USPD, almost 300,000 strong, to the Communist International in October 1920 and unity with the KPD in December 1920. There were now more than 350,000 German Communists, although, compared with the SPD, the KPD remained small. In the state elections in Prussia, where a majority of Germans lived, in February 1921 the SPD won over 26 per cent of the vote, the KPD less than 8 per cent.<sup>27</sup>

On the initiative of Levi and Radek, the Party deepened its efforts to win over social democratic workers. Generalising the experience of the Stuttgart call, the KPD published an open letter to the SPD, other working class parties and trade unions on 8 January 1921, proposing united action over workers' living standards, unemployment, arming workers, amnesty for political prisoners and trade relations with Russia.

Ordinary workers put pressure on their unions and parties to respond positively. Because of the practical, if not always verbal hostility of the leaders of the social democratic organisations, there was no joint campaign. But by demonstrating its commitment to common action to defend the working class, the KPD was able to involve more workers in struggles it led and made significant gains.<sup>28</sup>

Faction fighting in the KPD, in which the Comintern's representatives, influenced by factional considerations in the Russian Communist Party, supported leftist opponents of Levi, put an end to this sensible orientation. Levi and several supporters were driven off the executive and the new leadership majority, encouraged by the Comintern, organised an ill-fated uprising when only a minority of the working class wanted revolutionary change. As a result of the 1921 "March Action", Party membership collapsed to around 150,000. Thousands of members were imprisoned, many more were sacked and Communist influence in the working class plummeted.<sup>29</sup> For publicly criticising the March Action, as opposed to engaging in debate within the Party, Levi was expelled and the KPD lost its most competent tactician.

Levi's expulsion did not prevent leaders of the international Communist movement, particularly Lenin and Trotsky, from endorsing the "open letter" and condemning the "theory of the offensive" which had justified the March Action. Over opposition from ultra-left delegates from Germany and Italy in particular, the Third Congress of the Third International in the middle of 1921 placed Levi's approach at the centre of its recommendations to the mass Communist Parties. This was the foundation of the Comintern's united front tactic. In a speech Lenin insisted that "The 'Open Letter' is a model political step...because it is the first act of a practical method of winning over the majority of the working class." He went on to point out that it was not sufficient to lead mass struggles of several thousands of workers for the revolution to be successful. "We must, therefore, win over to our side not only the majority of the working class, but also the majority of the working and exploited rural population."<sup>30</sup> He wrote to Zinoviev, who had endorsed the March Action, arguing that

None of the Communist Parties anywhere have yet won the majority (of the working class), not only as regards organisational leadership, but to the principles of communism as well. This is the basis of everything.

...revolutionary explosions are possible nevertheless very soon considering the abundance of inflammable material in Europe; an easy victory of the working class - in exceptional cases - is also possible.

But it would be absurd now to base the tactics of the Communist International on this possibility; it is absurd and harmful to write and think that the propaganda period has ended and the period of action has started.

The tactics of the Communist International should be based on a steady and systematic drive to win the majority of the working class, first and foremost within the old trade unions. Then we shall win for certain, whatever the course of events. As for "winning" for a short time in an exceptionally happy turn of events - any fool can do that.

Hence: the tactic of the Open Letter should definitely be applied everywhere.<sup>31</sup>

The formal recommendations of the Comintern and ECCI were not always as clear as Lenin's and Trotsky's statements. The Congress's resolution on tactics was ambiguous about the circumstances in which the open letter approach was appropriate. It refers to "Communist Parties [that] represent a mass force" but goes on to discuss Communist Parties in general.<sup>32</sup> In the resolution "united front" was used as a very broad term for working class solidarity or organisational unity. But in the language of the Comintern it soon meant the open letter tactic.

In today's terms, the united front tactic is a form of revolutionary "wedge politics" and, as Duncan Hallas put it,

demands that the revolutionary organisation disposes of real forces of its own. This has naturally, to be taken in relation to the area of struggle and to the size of the reformist or centrist currents and organisations. It also has to be tested in practice.<sup>33</sup>

So long as the revolutionary party making united front proposals is large and credible, social democratic leaders are faced with a lose-lose choice. If they participate in united front struggles that serve workers' interests, such initiatives are more likely to be successful and revolutionaries will be in a good position to convince ordinary social democrats that efforts to drive change from below and a more militant orientation are superior to reformist politics, preoccupied with parliaments and elections. If social democratic leaders reject genuine proposals for joint struggle over specific concrete and popular demands, the prospects for involving rank and file social democrats in actions initiated by revolutionaries are nevertheless better than if no offer had been made. And the chances that such actions will achieve good results will be greater. If the wedge is to work, serious proposals for united action cannot provide reformist leaders with avoidable excuses for rejecting the overtures of the left. So the offers should not require or

assume preconditions unrelated to the main, immediate goals and methods of struggle.

This was not clearly understood by the ECCI in a united front appeal to workers "of all parties" around the world, on New Year's Day 1922. The call was a bombastic and cack-handed effort compared to the German open letter. Rather than proposing joint action with social democratic parties and trade unions it effectively demanded, in condescending terms, that their members immediately adopt revolutionary politics and repudiate their former views and leaders.

Your experience up to now must have shown even the blind that the Communist International was right when it said, "The working class can only free itself by breaking the power of the bourgeoisie and establishing the rule of the working class, by clearing away the ruins of the war and, closely united internationally, beginning the work of reconstruction."<sup>33,34</sup>

Furthermore, the united front tactic in this specific sense cannot generally be employed by small revolutionary groups. Without running the risk of being discredited, social democratic leaders can easily ignore proposals that come from organisations that do not already have mass support. In theses for a meeting of the ECCI in late February 1922, Trotsky spelt out the circumstances in which the united front was an appropriate tactic at a national level:

In cases where the Communist Party still remains an organisation of a numerically insignificant minority, the question of its conduct on the mass-struggle front does not assume a decisive practical and organisational significance. In such conditions, mass actions remain under the leadership of the old organisations which by reason of their still powerful traditions continue to play the decisive role.

Similarly the problem of the united front does not arise in countries where - as in Bulgaria, for example - the Communist Party is the sole leading organisation of the toiling masses.

But wherever the Communist Party already constitutes a big, organised, political force, but not the decisive magnitude: wherever the party embraces organisationally, let us say, one-fourth, one-third, or even a larger proportion of the organised proletarian vanguard, it is confronted with the question of the united front in all its acuteness.

If the party embraces one-third or one-half of the proletarian vanguard, then the remaining half or two-thirds are organised by the reformists or centrists. It is perfectly obvious, however, that even those workers who still support the reformists and the centrists are vitally interested in maintaining the highest material standards of living and the greatest possible freedom for struggle. We must consequently so devise

our tactic as to prevent the Communist Party, which will on the morrow embrace the entire three-thirds of the working class, from turning into - and all the more so, from actually being - an organisational obstacle in the way of the current struggle of the proletariat.<sup>35</sup>

In 1922-3, the KPD returned to the united front tactic. An independent and generally conservative union of railway workers called a strike in early February 1922, when the government, which included Social Democrats, imposed job cuts and increased hours. Despite the hostility of social democratic union leaders, most railway workers participated. The KPD was the only party to support the striking workers. Communists intervened effectively in a series of other strikes, as economic conditions deteriorated. After the assassination of German Foreign Minister Walter Rathenau on 22 June 1922, the KPD called on the SPD to act together against right wing death-squads which attacked the left and other "betrayers of the fatherland". The workers' parties and social democratic unions jointly led mass protest strikes. Communists set up paramilitary "proletarian hundreds" in which non-communist workers participated. The government freed some left wing political prisoners, and took token steps to suppress death squads and purge the far right from the public service, military and judiciary. In the face of rising inflation and efforts by employers to hold down wages, reduce conditions and sack militants, Communists revived the factory councils as democratic organisations of struggle in many workplaces and involved supporters of the SPD. The reformist leaders rejected most of the KPD's calls for united action between the parties. But thanks to this approach, the Party's membership was 100,000 more at the end of 1922 than immediately after the March Action.<sup>36</sup>

The Fourth Congress of the Comintern, in December 1922, however, confused discussion of the united front. On the one hand, its advocacy of the united front was tainted by the spirit of the appeal issued at the beginning of the year, mentioned above, as the ECCI invoked the alleged experience of the Bolsheviks in 1912 and the slogan "unity from below".<sup>37</sup> A united front that was purely *from below* was nonsense. In effect, this formulation meant that unity over immediate practical actions and demands could only be achieved if social democratic workers first broke with their leaders. In theses for the ECCI, already quoted, Trotsky had explained this:

Does the united front extend only to the working masses or does it also include the opportunist leaders?

The very posing of this question is a product of misunderstanding.

If we were able simply to unite the working masses around our own banner or around our practical immediate slogans, and skip over reformist organisations, whether party or trade union, that would of course be the best thing in the world. But then the very question of the united front would not exist in its present form.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, the Congress maintained that it was permissible for Communist Parties to participate in "workers' governments" based on bourgeois parliamentary institutions, in coalition with social democrats. This went much further than the Bolsheviks' and KPD's preparedness to support social democratic governments from outside the ministries in August 1917 and March 1920 and disoriented the KPD in the revolutionary situation of 1923.

Hyperinflation and economic collapse followed the French occupation of the Ruhr district in January 1923 over the failure of Germany to deliver war reparations. There were militant strikes as the value of wages evaporated. Physical clashes between workers and the police and far right groups increased in number and intensity. For a while, the KPD seemed to have the support of more workers than the SPD, at least in several large, industrial regions.<sup>39</sup> As the popularity of the KPD's call for a workers' government increased, mass strike action across the country brought down the conservative Chancellor Wilhelm Cuno's government on 12 August. The time had come for insurrectionary tactics. These were compromised by a distorted version of the united front. Moreover the united front tactic was inappropriate, given that the KPD was itself in a position to lead the majority of the working class. In late August, the leaderships of the Russian and German Communist Parties finally decided that revolution was on the agenda. This conclusion was probably correct, though the delay in reaching it meant that there was little time for effective preparations and the tactics adopted were faulty. They were too reliant on workers' detachments obtaining arms in Saxony and Thuringia after Communists entered coalition governments with the SPD, as junior partners.<sup>40</sup> The national government acted more decisively, sending troops to occupy Saxony and Thuringia. There were no arms to be obtained on the authority of state government officials. Even though the political and economic crisis persisted, the KPD was too timid to put the issue to the test by issuing the call for a general strike and insurrection in its own name. The Party cancelled the planned uprising after a conference of Saxon workers' organisations failed to adopt the Communists' resolution for a general strike. Over the following months, the national government was able to stabilise German capitalism, at the expense of

the working class. The era of revolutions, which had begun in 1916 in Dublin was over. The united front tactic had helped the KPD and Comintern to strengthen the revolutionary movement, but weaknesses of Communist leadership particularly in Germany meant that the high point was October 1917.

## 5. Other tactics in the 1920s

If Communist politics were to be effective in Britain, they had to find a mass audience. The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was, at its foundation in August 1920, only about 5,000 strong, internally divided and infected with the abstract propagandist perspective of the left social democratic British Socialist Party (BSP), from which most of its members came. This was despite the high levels of class struggle that had begun during the war and continued into the 1920s. The British Labour Party (BLP), on the other hand, was a mass workers' organisation based on the trade unions whose leaders were thoroughly committed to maintaining capitalism. In a controversy over whether the new CPGB should, like the BSP, affiliate to the Labour Party, Lenin supported affiliation. He believed that it would not hinder the CPGB from openly expressing its positions and particularly its critique of the Labour Party leadership and would improve access to millions of workers. If Labour rejected the application for affiliation, that would demonstrate that it was not serious about working class unity in struggle. The BLP executive did, indeed, reject the application made shortly after the CPGB was formed, accurately observing that the CPGB's perspectives seemed to contradict Labour's "constitution, principles and program".<sup>41</sup>

The Communists' main focus was, sensibly, on industrial struggles, but they continued efforts to affiliate to the Labour Party. The Labour Party conference in 1924 decided that members of the CPGB could not also be members of the BLP. Many Communists and Communist-sympathisers nevertheless continued to hold Labour Party cards. In 1925 the CPGB decided that it would be good if there was an organised left in the BLP. There were no growing, leftward-moving forces inside the Labour Party so the CPGB fabricated an organised Labour left. The justification was that such a current would be a bridge to the Communist Party. But why, as Duncan Hallas has asked, would leftwingers in the Labour Party "join the CP if the object was to "remould" the Labour

Party, especially as the CP itself said that this was both possible and necessary?<sup>42</sup>

The tactic of building a Labour left, encouraged by the Comintern, now dominated by Stalin's policies, was a counterpart to the "united front" between some left wing union officials and the Communist Party, which amounted to uncritical Communist support for union leaders who participated in the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee alongside Russian unionists. This alleged united front involved no joint struggles. For, by 1925, the Comintern had drained "united front" of any specific content. It simply meant any manoeuvre designed to involve both Communist and other forces in the working class that the Russian leadership approved of.

The Comintern, through the British Party, provided the main funds and staff for the *Sunday Worker*, a new newspaper addressed to Labour Party members launched in March 1925. The CPGB then decided that a national conference of the Labour left would take place late in the year. Unwillingness to criticise the left union officials crippled the Communist intervention into the nine-day General Strike in May 1926. Those left leaders helped sell out this huge struggle between workers and capital. After the defeat of the strike, the levels of working class self-confidence and activity collapsed. On the initiative of the Communist Party, an organised National Left Wing Movement in the Labour Party was nevertheless established in September 1926 and it was given space in the offices of the *Sunday Worker*. The Movement was entirely dependent on the CPGB, although it included some people who weren't Communists and had to make concessions to them.

At the Greater London Left Wing conference in February, delegates took strong exception to the fact that all the main officers were Communists. The party beat a tactical retreat on this point, allowing the lesser posts of treasurer and vice-chairman to pass to "good Leftwingers"; but the fundamental problem of how to dominate a movement while appearing not to do so remained.<sup>43</sup>

The Left Wing Movement did not mobilise people in struggle, but it helped make the Labour Party more habitable for leftwingers and fostered illusions in it. The tactic failed to act as a bridge to the CPGB.<sup>44</sup>

The Communist Party of America, also prompted by the Comintern, engaged in manoeuvres with reformist forces. During the intense class struggles that followed World War I, left wing union leaders set up new electoral parties in a number of cities and states. In late 1919, many of them came together in Chicago to set up a Farmer-Labor Party with

national ambitions. This initiative had limited success. The factions on the US left that identified with the Comintern suffered from severe political repression, including the deportation of militant immigrants, and only united in a single Communist Party in May 1921 when the peak of the radical upsurge had passed. The illegal Communist Party identified the formation of an effective labour party as a form of united front in May 1922. The Comintern and particularly the former Hungarian Communist Joseph Pogany encouraged this perspective. As John Pepper, Pogany became, in effect, the leader of the Communist Party.<sup>45</sup>

The following year, the Farmer-Labor Party, based on Chicago's peak union body, the Federation of Labor led by the radical John Fitzpatrick, began to organise a convention on the foundation of a new party. The Communists (through their legal front, the Workers Party, WP) climbed on board. In fact, they took control of the train. But the class struggles which had first given the movement momentum had subsided. The bulk of the union movement did not participate in the convention. At least 190 of about 600 delegates were Communists. "The Fitzpatrick crowd came to the July 4, 1923 convention only with credentials from the masses behind them - that is, whatever masses there were - whereas the WP came with masses of credentials."<sup>46</sup> When it became clear that the new party would be dominated by the Communists, Fitzpatrick and his associates pulled out. Even with their involvement its prospects had been miserable. Without them, the new Federated Farmer-Labor Party (FFLP) was an extremely small, thin and hollow shell, which could do nothing to promote workers' interests. It organised "ourselves and our nearest relatives", a WP member later recalled.<sup>47</sup> Before the Communists thought better of it, the FFLP nominated candidates for president and vice-president in the 1924 election and "The Political Committee of the WP" wrote "a respectable, reformist program for them to run on".<sup>48</sup>

There was a vast distance between the open letter tactic, as a means to build mass Communist Parties in competition with larger social democratic parties, and bureaucratic relations between British and Russian union officials, or the construction of an organised left inside the British Labour Party by Communists, or Communist involvement in establishment of a labour party in the USA. They can only be understood under the common heading of "united front", if the term is watered down to mean any form of joint action, whether on a principled basis or not, by revolutionaries and non-revolutionaries.

## 6. No united front against fascism

The local *Arditi del Popolo* (Commandos of the People) prevented Fascists from taking over the city of Parma in August 1922, a couple of months before Mussolini became Italy's prime minister. The Parma *Arditi* were part of a national, anti-fascist combat organisation set up in June 1921 that brought together workers from a broad spectrum of political backgrounds, including Communists. Yet, under Amadeo Bordiga's ultra-left leadership, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) threatened members who became involved with expulsion. The potential of this united front organisation was wasted. As the leader of the Parma anti-fascists, socialist parliamentarian and later independent communist Guido Picelli put it:

Through individual communist participation in the *Arditi del Popolo* squads, the party would have been able to influence the whole organisation and to have won the leadership. With detailed preparatory work... the party would have been able to direct the movement towards a series of precise objectives, pulling the rest of the masses towards armed insurrection through the *Arditi del Popolo*, stopping the growth of reaction in Italy and changing the course of history.

The Comintern Congress in December 1922 emphasised the importance of united fronts "in the fight against the fascist gangs".<sup>50</sup> But, by the early 1930s, when the danger of a fascist take-over in Germany became serious, the Third International was no longer a means by which Communist parties could learn from each other's experiences. From 1923, Trotsky and his co-thinkers had been marginalised and then excluded from the Russian Party which dominated the International. Stalin and his temporary allies - first Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, later the "right", led by Nikolai Bukharin, Alexei Rykov and Mikhail Tomsky - squeezed the remaining democratic traditions out of the Party. At the end of the 1920s, the state and Party bureaucracy had constituted itself as a new ruling class confidently pursuing its own interests. No counterweight to the Russian Party had emerged in the Comintern, in large part as a consequence of its own disastrous interventions, like those into the Chinese revolution of 1925-27 and the 1926 general strike in Britain. The Comintern had become an instrument of the foreign policy of the Stalinist bureaucracy that now ruled Russia in its own interests.

During the Depression, the Comintern pursued an ultra-left course. Germany, where unemployment rose to around a third of the workforce,

experienced a profound political crisis as vast numbers of people lost faith in the old political institutions and mainstream political parties. Both the KPD and the Nazi Party grew rapidly. There was again potential for the KPD to win the support of the majority of the working class by proposing joint action with the SPD and trade unions over the immediate problems of unemployment, wages, homelessness and the rising threat of fascism. The line from Moscow was that social democrats were "social fascists". This ruled out serious united front policies, although rhetoric about the "united front from below" was revived.

As recently as 1926, the KPD had pursued an effective united front policy. It had pressured the SPD and social democratic unions into supporting a referendum to prevent the former rulers of the federal German states from being compensated for the property which had been confiscated after the revolution of November 1918. Unlike the KPD's most successful united front efforts during the class struggles of 1922-23, the campaign focused on posterity, leafletting, mass meetings, the collection of signatures and then the mobilisation of workers as voters, rather than strikers and demonstrators. Nonetheless, very large numbers of workers were involved. The referendum failed to change the constitution because less than half of the electorate participated in it. But almost 20 per cent more people signed the petition for the referendum than had supported the KPD and SPD in the previous federal election and a further 20 per cent voted yes.<sup>51</sup>

In 1931, the KPD and Comintern adopted a disgraceful position in another referendum. The German Communist Party made common front with the Nazis by supporting a referendum to bring down the social democrat-led government of Prussia. This collaboration with real fascists against "social fascists" hardly encouraged SPD sympathisers to take the Communist claims to represent workers' interests seriously.<sup>52</sup> Even many ordinary KPD members were not prepared to vote for the measure. Clashes between the *Rote Frontkämpferbund* (Red Front Fighters League), the Communist paramilitary organisation which succeeded the Proletarian Hundreds, and the SPD's *Reichsbanner* (National Flag) militia were also a consequence of the KPD's sectarian policies.

Now in exile, Trotsky offered incisive analyses of the situation in Germany and argued for a united front to defend the working class from the Nazis. Trotskyists still understood themselves as a left opposition within the Communist parties, even though most had been expelled, and attempted to win the Communist movement to united front politics.



Trotsky pointed out that "Election agreements, parliamentary compromises concluded between the revolutionary party and the Social Democracy serve, as a rule, to the advantage of Social Democracy. Practical agreements for mass action, for purposes of struggle, are always useful to the revolutionary Party."<sup>53</sup> He contrasted the experience of the struggle against Kornilov's coup in 1917 and the lessons of the early Comintern with the KPD's current practice: "The policy of the united front hastens the revolutionary development of the class by revealing in the open that the common struggle is undermined not by the disruptive acts of the Communist Party but by the conscious sabotage of the leaders of Social Democracy." Stalinism had perverted the united front tactic in two ways. On some occasions its error was leftist, calling for united action not around concrete aims but in pursuit of "radical slogans which were alien to the situation and which found no response in the masses", so that it was easy for reformist leaders to reject the proposal. At other times, notably in China in 1925-6 and Britain in 1926, Communists had bought unity with nationalists or reformists at the workers' expense.<sup>54</sup>

The Trotskyist forces in Germany were tiny, too small to influence the policies of the KPD, the SPD or even the recently formed but substantial Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei (Socialist Workers Party), which brought together former Communists and social democrats, let alone to make use of united front tactics themselves. There was no systematic opposition when Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany on 30 January 1933 and immediately started to smash workers' organisations.

In February 1934, an impetus for a united front against the rising power of French fascism came when participants greeted the intersection of two anti-fascist marches led by the French Communist Party (PCF) and the SFIO with jubilation. But the new line of the Comintern was that Communists should unite with forces well beyond the working class to resist fascism, in "popular fronts". Stalin hoped to build alliances between Russia and other countries against Nazi Germany by winning over "progressive" sections of their ruling classes. On the initiative of the PCF, agreement over united action between the Communists and Socialists in France was extended to include the bourgeois Radicals. In Spain, liberal Republicans participated in the Popular Front electoral coalition. In 1936, Popular Front governments were elected in Spain and France. Communist policy put the stability of these regimes ahead of working class interests. A right wing coup attempt against the Spanish Popular Front government triggered a

revolutionary movement in which workers and peasants armed, took over factories and expropriated big landowners. The Spanish Communist Party played a decisive role in suppressing this movement, disarming and murdering militant workers and returning property to capitalists who accepted the Popular Front government. In France, a massive upsurge in class struggle followed the election of the Popular Front. Again, the Communist Party was crucial in ending the movement. Its leader, Maurice Thorez, famously declared that it was "necessary to know how to end a strike". In both cases, the demobilisation of the working class weakened the resistance to fascism. The reactionary Nationalists led by General Francisco Franco and militarily supported by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany won the civil war in Spain. The French Popular Front government of Socialist prime minister Léon Blum gave way to a succession of more and more right wing conservative governments until the rump of the parliament elected in 1936 backed the regime of Marshal Pétain which collaborated with the German occupation of France.<sup>55</sup>

Trotsky's 1932 description of the errors in Comintern policy during the British general strike and the Chinese revolution also applied to the popular front. The interests of workers in other countries were now being sacrificed in a tactic of unity with bourgeois forces, which was deliberately formulated to advance the foreign policy of the state capitalist ruling class in Russia. But the Marxist insistence on the priority of working class interests and independent political organisation of workers to achieve those interests dates back much further than Trotsky. From early 1846, at the latest, Marx and Engels were committed to the political independence of working class organisations from other class forces. That's why they oriented to the League of the Just and initiated the Communist League. By 1848 they had concluded that the German bourgeoisie would not stand up against absolutism in Germany. In France workers rose up against the new bourgeois regime in June 1848 and were mown down on its orders. The workers' associations led by members of the League during the German revolution of 1848-49 remained separate from the Democratic associations, even when they were allied. In the course of the revolution, Marx and Engels learned that the radical petty bourgeois and liberal intelligentsia were also gutless. The Stalinist Comintern formulated the popular front tactic more than eighty years after these events and made concessions in order to establish and maintain alliances with parties "which have in them a considerable number of the working peasantry and the mass of the urban petty bourgeoisie", "despite their bourgeois

leadership".<sup>56</sup> The Communist Parties remained separate organisations but, at the behest of the state capitalist regime in Russia, subordinated their politics to the interests of local capitalist classes.

## 7. Entrism

After Hitler took power in March 1933, Trotsky recognised that the Communist Parties could not be won back to revolutionary politics. There was no force to implement united front policies. The priority for him and his small numbers of followers was to win new forces to revolutionary politics. They pursued a variety of tactics. In practice Trotskyist organisations in most countries were small propaganda groups. They attempted to build these by establishing routines of newspaper production and sales, regular meetings and relating to workers' struggles when they could. During the mid-1930s, sections of social democratic organisations in several countries moved to the left. Trotsky recommended in 1933 that his supporters in Britain join the Independent Labour Party (ILP), which had broken from the Labour Party. The goal was to win the leadership of the ILP. It was not achieved but a modest new layer of activists were recruited to revolutionary politics.<sup>57</sup>

In the context of the upsurge of working class self-confidence, in 1934 Trotsky advised his French followers to enter the SFIO. In this way, their puny forces could participate in the united front between the Socialists and Communists and be able to relate to the working class. Initially the openly Trotskyist faction they established achieved some gains in membership and influence. But after the Socialist Party endorsed Communist proposals for a popular front with the bourgeois Radicals, the space for the Trotskyists to campaign for their positions within the Party narrowed. Their newspaper was banned by the Party leadership. Trotsky urged them to depart from the SFIO and establish a new organisation. The debates over this course resulted in splits and most of the gains made by the entry operation were lost. Trotsky concluded that "Entry into a reformist-centrist party in itself does not include a long-term perspective. It is only a stage which under certain conditions can be limited to an episode."<sup>58</sup>

This entrism tactic was generalised and pursued in other countries as the "French turn". While they had started off as a very small group of perhaps 100 in 1929, the Trotskyists in the United States included some members with extensive experience in the leadership of the Communist

Party. As working class militancy revived after the depths of the Depression, Trotskyists played a prominent role in the 1934 Minneapolis teamsters' (truck drivers') struggle and general strike. Late that year, they merged their organisation with A. J. Muste's leftward-moving American Workers Party. The resulting Workers Party of the United States had roughly 700 members. In line with the "French turn", it entered the Socialist Party of America in 1936. The right wing of the SPA had split away: the organisation was moving to the left and growing. The Party's most prominent leader, Norman Thomas, encouraged non-communist radicals to become members. Although they had to join as individuals and give up their newspaper, the Trotskyists soon had control of publications associated with sections of the SPA and established a formal faction. They worked with a broad layer of activists in the SPA, its youth group and beyond in union struggles and the campaign in solidarity with the Spanish revolution. The leadership of the Socialist Party soon purged the Trotskyists and branches which supported them. They established the Socialist Workers Party on New Years Day 1938. The new organisation was about twice as large as the Workers Party, although relatively few of the new members were workers. Amongst those recruited from the SPA and its youth wing were many talented activists, including Hal Draper. On the other hand, Trotskyists had already demonstrated their ability to relate to large industrial mobilisations in Minneapolis, before they joined the SPA, and the entry operation consumed a great deal of energy during the huge struggles of 1936-7 which saw the emergence of militant mass unionism, coordinated by the Congress of Industrial Organisations.<sup>59</sup>

Neither Trotsky nor his followers considered that entrism was an example of the united front. The two tactics were distinct in purpose and method. The united front was designed to bring about mass working class action and to increase the relative power of a substantial revolutionary party, when most workers took their lead from a larger reformist party. Entrism was designed to help small revolutionary groups to grow and recruit workers. As Tony Cliff has pointed out, the "French turn" had at best mixed results.<sup>60</sup> In the United States and Belgium, it helped Trotskyist organisations to grow. Elsewhere the groups which emerged from entry operations were often smaller or less united than those that had begun them. This is not to say that maintaining their organisations outside social democratic parties would necessarily have been any more successful, given the difficult circumstances. Splits were often associated with the start and end of entry operations. Small socialist groups generally have few resources,

negligible influence and little to offer recruits beyond their distinctive ideas. These are conditions that make splits over perspectives (not only those related to relations with social democratic parties) more likely than in larger organisations.

After World War II various Trotskyist groups again engaged in entrism tactics. All were driven by desperation, when prosperity and the hegemony of reformism and Stalinism on the left in advanced capitalist countries made it extremely difficult to be a politically active revolutionary. In Britain, the Trotskyist movement was fragmented after 1949. The Socialist Review Group (SRG), with 33 members in 1950, was led by Tony Cliff, who had developed an analysis of Russia as a state capitalist regime and recognised that world capitalism had entered a period of sustained growth. Most of the Group's members were active in the Labour Party and had the modest goal of finding the odd new recruit to their revolutionary politics. Their entrism was pragmatic, based on an assessment that there would be no rapid shift in political circumstances in the near future.

The Socialist Review group was, throughout the fifties, a purely propaganda group; it was not able to make any meaningful intervention in the class struggle. But propaganda has to have an audience; and unless a revolutionary group remains in intimate contact with its audience, the dangers of falling into a complete fantasy world are great indeed. Throughout the fifties the Socialist Review group, despite its limited numbers, always strove to relate to the actual problems of the working class.<sup>61</sup>

The political situation shifted with the emergence of a new left. Many experienced Communists left the CPGB after the "secret speech" of Russian Communist boss Nikita Khrushchev denouncing Stalin's crimes in February and the Russian invasion of Hungary in November 1956. From 1958, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament through its marches and other activities radicalised a new generation. The SRG now found it easier to recruit, particularly through work in the Labour Party's new youth organisation, set up in 1960. By 1964 when Labour was elected, the group, now called the International Socialists (IS), had about 200 members. In response to Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson's anti-working class policies and rising levels of industrial struggle, the IS in 1965 decided on a "phased withdrawal" from the Labour Party.<sup>62</sup>

Other Trotskyist currents covered the desperation of their entry work with a veneer of self-deception about what it could achieve. The mainstream of Trotskyism was committed to the dogma that Russia was

a "degenerated workers' state" and that the other countries of the Soviet bloc were "deformed workers' states". The largest Trotskyist group in Britain during the 1950s, the Club, believed that a profound economic crisis was imminent during which radicalised workers would gravitate to the left wing of the Labour Party and push it in a revolutionary direction. In 1959, the Club set up the Socialist Labour League which operated entirely outside the BLP from 1964 but retained the expectation that economic collapse would catapult it into the leadership of the working class. The current that became the Militant Tendency concluded that its duty was to work in the BLP, in which a "mass centrist [grouping] with large numbers of workers groping for a revolutionary lead" would inevitably emerge, and remained within the Labour Party for more than forty years.<sup>63</sup>

There were Trotskyists in several countries who, under the influence of Michel Pablo, the secretary of the tiny Trotskyist Fourth International between 1948 and 1960, entered Communist Parties. They believed that these Stalinist organisations would be forced to play a progressive role by the circumstances of the imminent conflict, "war-revolution", between imperialism and the Soviet bloc.<sup>64</sup>

## 8. Revival and decline of the revolutionary left

For decades the revolutionary left in developed countries had, at best, only a small impact on major political and industrial campaigns. As the revolutionary left again became a more significant force in many countries and the levels of class struggle rose from the mid-1960s, this began to change. A much larger activist and organised new left emerged from the massive industrial conflicts of May 1968 in France, and the northern autumn of 1969 in Italy, from increasing social conflict in Germany and rising levels of strike activity and the anti-war movement in Britain, the United States and Australia. Old revolutionary groups which had remained small as a consequence of the boom after World War II, the Cold War and the continuing weight of social democratic and Stalinist organisations on the left began to grow and new ones emerged. After the 1970s, workers suffered setbacks, if not serious defeats in all developed countries, as the end of the boom drove ruling classes onto the offensive. The far left declined in size and influence almost everywhere. The main focus in the following discussion is on the Socialist Workers Party in Britain because it is one of the largest revolutionary organisations in the world, has been more successful than

others in maintaining the gains it made during the 1960s and 1970s and has consistently worked with other forces on the left.

In Australia, from 1965 a handful of Trotskyists who were members of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) played a prominent role in the Vietnam Action Committee (VAC). It organised more confrontational actions and made more radical demands to end Australian involvement in the Vietnam War than the larger but more passive peace groups dominated by the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and the mainstream ALP left which shared many positions. The VAC grew large enough to lever these forces into supporting some militant demonstrations, including one against US President Lyndon Johnson when he visited Sydney in 1966.<sup>65</sup>

The membership of the International Socialists (IS) in Britain grew rapidly from around 400 in 1967 to about 3,000 in 1974. In 1977, the organisation, now called the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) had 4,000 members. Like the handful of Australian Trotskyists in the VAC, since its formation in the 1950s the SWP and its predecessors had participated in campaigns, attempting to build them, shape their policies and win people to revolutionary politics. The tiny SRG had necessarily been a very minor player in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), but the larger IS participated in the establishment and was able to influence the direction of a large campaign over public housing in London during the mid-1960s and the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign from 1965. By relating effectively to the political ferment and struggles of 1968 – militant demonstrations in solidarity with the Vietnamese fight against United States occupation, the industrial and political upheavals in France, the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, and increased industrial volatility in Britain – the IS more than doubled its membership over the year to about 1,000.<sup>66</sup> As it continued to grow during the 1970s and the influence of the reformist and increasingly moribund CPGB declined, the SWP was sometimes able to initiate serious campaigns itself. As unemployment climbed after the end of the long post-war boom, in 1975 the SWP set up the Right to Work Campaign which organised demonstrations and right to work marches across England in 1976 and 1977. Right to Work won the backing of a few Labour MPs and union leaders. It was, for a time, a “modest success”, though it was not a united front. Its demands were directed against the policies of the Labour government, to which most union officials were loyal. The Communist Party, still with a more substantial base in workplaces than the SWP, was hostile. So the relatively small SWP was unable to exercise the leverage necessary to force Labour

leaders, trade union officials or even significant sections of them to choose between supporting serious and sustained mass action, on the one hand, and risking being discredited in the eyes of a large proportion of their members, on the other.<sup>67</sup>

The Anti-Nazi League (ANL), launched in 1977, was significantly more successful. It was a response to the rapid growth of the fascist National Front (NF). Tens of thousands of people participated in ANL protests and other actions. Eighty thousand and then 100,000 marched to the anti-racist Carnivals it organised with Rock against Racism in 1977 and 1978. There was no open letter to the Labour Party or the Trades Union Congress, but approaches were made to individual Labour MPs and union bodies from the local to the national level. Ten national unions and about forty Labour MPs endorsed the campaign, which had contact with 600 “workplace organisations” and many local groups. The union of college lecturers’ conference “overturned an executive ruling by a two thirds majority in order to affiliate.”<sup>68</sup> Pincer between the ANL’s campaign and the rise in support for the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher, the NF suffered a massive setback in the 1979 national elections and split in the early 1980s; its membership fell to 1,000 in 1985.<sup>69</sup>

Accusations that the ANL was either a front for the SWP or a popular front are simply wrong. The involvement of Labour parliamentarians and trade union leaders gave the campaign a profile and legitimacy without which it could not have otherwise mobilised so many people. These social democratic leaders, hardly babes in the wood when it came to political manoeuvring, therefore had considerable leverage within the ANL, even though SWP members took disproportionate responsibility for creating and sustaining it compared to the efforts of the Labour Party and union activists who also helped make it a success. On the other hand, the endorsements of respectable figures were not bought at the expense of the ANL’s activist orientation – to combine mass education, through leafletting, posterage, sticking and events like the Carnivals, with counter-demonstrations against the fascists when they tried to march or meet publicly.<sup>70</sup> By way of contrast, the popular fronts of the 1930s watered down working class demands and undermined struggles to win the participation of bourgeois political forces in electoral blocs.

The SWP revived the ANL in the early 1990s, after the British National Party, a descendant of the National Front, made electoral advances. In 2004, the ANL merged into Unite Against Fascism (UAF). The new organisation drew support from Labour parliamentarians and

most trade unions and mobilised large numbers of people in direct political activity, including counter-demonstrations against BNP and English Defence League events. UAF's founding treasurer was Billy Hayes, the general secretary of the Communication Workers Union, while Trades Union Congress general secretary Brendan Barber "called on every trade unionist to join the leafleting" against the BNP in April 2004.<sup>71</sup> Weyman Bennett of the SWP was one of the two founding joint secretaries of UAF.

### 9. Tactics in new situations

Competition between substantial reformist and revolutionary forces in the labour movement was a new feature of politics in many countries after World War I. Today matters are very different. Revolutionary organisations only range in size from microscopic to small, and most traditional social democratic parties are in decline. The SWP in Britain is one of the largest revolutionary groups in the developed world today, although its dues-paying membership seems to be fewer than 5,000. The condition of social democracy is not primarily a matter of electoral success. Even parties whose loyal support base is shrinking can win elections. While social democrats only headed five governments of European Union countries in 2010, down from well over half at the end of the 1990s, the New Democratic Party surged ahead to win its most votes ever and become the official opposition in Canada for the first time in 2011. The issue is a pattern of increasingly conservative policies associated with declines in the membership, working class composition, links with trade unions and the *core* electoral support of the old social democratic parties.

In 1952 the BLP had over a million members. In 2003, there were fewer than 200,000, the lowest since figures were first collected in 1928, dropping further to 125,000 in 2009 when there were about 62 million people in the United Kingdom. The size of the membership improved, as the Party's poll results did, after Labour lost office, but was still below 180,000 in September 2010. Over the past two decades, the fall in membership has been accompanied by an even more pronounced decline in the number of Party activists and in the size and influence of the Labour left.<sup>72</sup> In Australia, the ALP's membership was around 37,000 in 2010, when the Australian population was over 22 million, down from 75,000 in 1953 in a population well under half as large, and even less than the low level of 45,000 in 1958, after the great split. A

small proportion of members are politically active and local branches tend to be dominated by parliamentarians, their staffers and elected local government officials.<sup>73</sup> In Germany the number of SPD members fell below half a million in 2011, when the population was almost 82 million, for the first time since 1906, down from 1.2 million in 1976. Over half the membership in 2008 was over 60 years old and only 10 per cent under 36. The SPD may have had almost 10,000 local branches in 2010, but fewer than half had held more than two general meetings over the previous year.<sup>74</sup> All three parties in government during the 2000s pursued neoliberal economic and aggressively imperialist foreign policies. This is not to say that it is impossible for reformist parties to revive or new ones to emerge. But, at present, there are no vast numbers of dedicated members and supporters who loyally take their lead from social democratic parties as there were in the past, notably during the 1920s and 1930s when the classic united front tactic was formulated. Although the political degeneration and numerical decline of trade unions has been less pronounced, in these three and many other developed countries, union density has fallen and union officials have generally failed to lead campaigns whose militancy matched the viciousness of the attacks by employers and governments on workers' living standards and conditions.

It is true that "The rightward shift of mainstream social democracy opened up a space to its left".<sup>75</sup> That space has been defined by the experience of the movement against capitalist globalisation from 1999, the massive protests against the invasion of Iraq, the emergence of substantial new left reformist parties in Italy and Germany, and recent episodes of impressive resistance to austerity in several developed European countries in the wake of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. Yet nowhere in the developed world has the far left broken through to build a revolutionary organisation of more than a few thousand members. The new circumstances have, nevertheless, provided opportunities for revolutionary groups to exercise greater influence and to grow.

Woolly definitions of the united front can hamper revolutionaries' efforts to develop tactics appropriate to their own forces and their changing contexts. Since leaving the SWP, for example, John Rees has outlined Trotsky's conception of the united front tactic to draw contemporary lessons, presumably for his own small group, the Counterfire network. Solidarity, with fewer than 100 members, has done the same in Australia.<sup>76</sup> The confused notion that the united front tactic is relevant to tiny groups can only undermine sober assessment of

political situations and the tactics appropriate for organisations that fall well short of being revolutionary parties. The main asset of such groups is not their weight in society but the clarity of their analysis, particularly as a guide to political action that is necessarily on a very modest scale. When very small groups try to employ united front tactics, the result is either hot air or a softness on reformists, in the hope that this will encourage them to improve their positions or become involved in campaigns.<sup>77</sup>

Apart from activity in trade unions, especially in developed countries, campaign work is the most common general tactic through which revolutionaries relate to other currents on the left today. From committees made up of a few individuals that call protests of just dozens of people, to campaign coordinating bodies which can range to large organising meetings made up of delegates from affiliated parties and unions, churches, as well as community, welfare or small political groups, that build demonstrations of tens or hundreds of thousands. They may last for a week or two, months or years. Their procedure may be informal or strict and codified. Most don't even approximate united fronts between mass reformist and revolutionary parties. The balance of forces in campaigns can vary dramatically. They may be totally dominated by social democratic organisations. For example, the Australian Council of Trade Unions conducted the Your Rights at Work campaign, which mobilised tens of thousands of workers, between 2005 and 2007. Its goal was the election of a Labor government in 2007. There were some very large rallies, huge amounts of publicity and advertising and, in the early stages, some industrial action.<sup>78</sup> Far left involvement was overwhelmingly limited to participating in the demonstrations and marches.

Socialist organisations had more scope to influence the Australian movement against the invasion of Iraq. In the largest cities, serious reformist and small-l liberal forces were involved in the umbrella groups. In Melbourne the leading role was played by the Victorian Peace Network which had the backing of the Victorian Trades Hall Council, the peak union body in the State, and brought together amongst others churches, peace groups and left wing political organisations. In Sydney, more conservative ALP and union figures participated and provided resources but were content for the far left to do much of the practical organising. In April 2003, the more conservative forces and the (previously pro-Moscow) Communist Party set up a new and stillborn body and stacked a meeting to dissolve the existing umbrella organisation when it backed the anti-war protests of school students,

over the opposition of police and the State Labor government. Lack of interest from the ALP and unions meant that the tiny Socialist Alternative and the Democratic Socialist Party groups in the small city of Canberra took on major organising responsibilities and had a modest impact on the tone of the movement there. Most of the practical work of poster and leafletting everywhere was undertaken by people who were not mobilised by any political party or group, though many no doubt heard about the campaign through their unions, but took individual initiatives to become involved. It was they, the relatively small number of activists across the country (a few hundred, many of them socialists) who coordinated the campaign, and the sensationalism of the mass media that turned widespread anger over the impending war into the largest mobilisations in Australia's history: around one million people marched on the weekend of 15 February 2003.<sup>79</sup> Socialist Alternative's membership grew from 160 in August 2002 to 210 a year later,<sup>80</sup> mainly through the combination of efforts to build the anti-war campaign and strong emphasis on a propaganda routine of magazine sales, public meetings and contact work that highlighted the relevance of Marxism.

The larger size of the SWP, compared with the Australian far left, and the fact that the BLP was in government while the ALP was in opposition during this period meant that aspects of the anti-war campaign in Britain were different. The main UK body that organised people against the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and then Iraq was the Stop the War Coalition (StWC). On 15 February 2003, around two million people demonstrated in London against preparations for the invasion of Iraq. This was the largest protest in the city ever. The SWP's leading role in building StWC increased the prominence of anti-imperialist ideas and the focus on mass protests, as opposed to respectable lobbying and, as in the case of the ANL, was vital to the campaign's successes.<sup>81</sup> Anti-war activity in Britain peaked in 2003. But in 2006 14 national unions were affiliated with the Coalition. Unions provided funds, other material support and speakers for protests. Left Labour politicians who opposed the war also helped build the StWC.<sup>82</sup>

The scale of mobilisations organised by the StWC and the popular anger it tapped invite comparison with the classic united front tactic of the 1920s. Revolutionaries played an impressive role in leading a campaign that certainly had the potential to help win people with reformist ideas to revolutionary politics, through their involvement in practical action alongside revolutionaries. There were also very

significant differences between the situation during the 1920s and 1930s and that of the 2000s. The SWP and the BLP were weaker organisations than the CPGB and BLP after World War I and, as a corollary, the vast majority of the people – mainly workers – mobilised by the campaign were not members or close supporters of either party, nor were they militant unionists. The most important contribution to the Coalition made by supportive union leaders and parliamentarians was not the undoubtedly useful resources they provided and still less their very limited ability to licence the participation of loyal members. It was rather the credibility and media profile that came from the endorsement of the campaign by public figures who people recognised – which it would have lacked if the StWC had simply been a creature of the far left. As a consequence, the prominent reformists in the StWC were, despite the weakness of their organisations compared with earlier decades, in a strong position to influence the direction of the campaign. The situation and the tactics revolutionaries employed in Britain during the anti-war campaign of the early 2000s were more like those in Australia at the same time than the united front tactic in Europe, between seventy and eighty years before.

Alex Callinicos has maintained that the construction of “radical left” electoral formations could be an effective route to building a revolutionary party. Such formations “implied a break with the mainstream centre-left but not a commitment to socialist revolution”.<sup>83</sup> This assessment made some sense in situations where there were opportunities to work within real left-moving social democratic parties, although it ran the risk of placing too much stress on small numbers of revolutionaries putting disproportionate energy into standing left wing candidates in elections rather than trying to win people over to clear and relevant Marxist arguments, particularly when they are involved in direct, mass action. The revolutionary left gained little organisationally from its efforts inside the Italian *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista* (Party of Communist Refoundation) as its leaders oriented to the movement against capitalist globalisation in the early 2000s. When *Rifondazione* suffered multiple splits and a halving of its membership after its participation in a government that sent Italian troops to Lebanon and Afghanistan, some of the Trotskyists who had earlier entered the party broke away, while others remained behind. In Germany, the Marx21 Network and its forerunner *Linksruck*, with politics like the SWP, has operated inside the new left-reformist party, *die Linke* (the Left) and its predecessor since the mid-2000s. Marx21 has put much of its energy into routine work inside *die Linke* and includes two members

of the federal parliament and two members of state parliaments. But it has not built a cadre of revolutionaries on a scale larger than when it operated as an independent group.

The concept of the “radical left” is less relevant in countries where no substantial left-reformist organisation exists. But it has been combined with an inventive definition of the united front, to justify a political tactic which has never had any success. From 2001, the SWP put a major effort into building the national Socialist Alliance – effectively the common electoral vehicle of several far left groups – as a radical reformist electoral organisation. It was supposed to intersect with those radicalised by the movement against capitalist globalisation, starting with protests against the Seattle World Trade Organisation meeting in November 1999.<sup>84</sup> The Alliance’s active membership, however, never extended far beyond the adherents of various far left groups and it failed to achieve an electoral breakthrough. In 2004, the SWP and some other participants in the Socialist Alliance shifted their energies to a broader electoral formation, Respect, with prominent figures and local activists in the Stop the War Coalition. They included George Galloway, who held a Scottish seat in the UK parliament and was expelled from the Labour Party for opposing the war on Iraq, and a layer of Muslim anti-war campaigners. The rationale was that the far left could fill the “huge vacuum” in British electoral politics that existed because of Labour’s shift to the right by creating an “electorally credible alternative”, that is, a left reformist organisation that those opposed to Labour’s policies could vote for.<sup>85</sup> Galloway was elected to a London seat in the 2005 national elections and a few Respect candidates were elected to local councils in 2004 and 2006. Respect, in 2007, disintegrated in an acrimonious split between Galloway and his supporters, and the SWP.<sup>86</sup>

John Rees used the phrase “united front of a particular kind” or “special type” in 2001 and 2002 to describe the Socialist Alliance.<sup>87</sup> Other leaders of the Socialist Workers Party later referred to Respect in similar terms.<sup>88</sup> In fact, both were united fronts of an “ordinary kind” if united front has the loose meaning of “workers doing stuff together” that can include trade unions and soviets, as Trotsky, quoted by Rees, put it in 1932.<sup>89</sup> They were not united fronts of any kind, if the reference is to Trotsky’s more precise conception of joint action by mass revolutionary and social democratic parties, which he spelt out in the same publication.<sup>90</sup> As we have seen, this was the approach he shared with Lenin and, unevenly, with other Comintern leaders for a period from 1921. At its core, the united front understood this way was a tactic

designed to promote joint *direct action* by reformists and revolutionaries that would demonstrate the superiority of Marxist politics. Reformist workers would become involved either because their leaders accepted the overtures from revolutionaries or, probably in smaller numbers, if their leaders lost credibility by rejecting reasonable proposals for united action to achieve concrete and urgent goals. The Socialist Alliance and Respect existed primarily to mobilise people to *vote*. The priorities of the "united front of a special kind" help explain why the SWP was no larger in 2008 than at the end of the 1990s. Ultimately, the failure of Respect tells us much more about the appropriate electoral ambitions of a revolutionary organisation with a few thousand members in a population of around 60 million than it does about the united front tactic.

The SWP's efforts to create a left wing electoral presence in Britain during the first decade of the twenty-first century recall the WP's Federated Farmer-Labour Party adventure in 1923 and the CPGB's attempt to create a Labour left from 1925. Like the National Left Wing Movement in the minds of CPGB leaders, Respect was supposed, by the SWP, to be a left reformist bridge which Labour Party supporters could traverse on a path to revolutionary politics. There is no evidence that it functioned in this way. These three operations did not engage with significant reformist forces or focus on mass political actions around concrete demands. They were based on the questionable premise that the emergence of a left reformist party or current was a necessary precondition for the advance of the revolutionary left. Constructing these artificial electoral formations, whatever label they bore, was not an effective tactic for building the revolutionary left.

The tactics revolutionaries have employed in the past are resources on which we can draw today. But they are not precise recipes whose results will always be palatable, whatever the ingredients we use. The recipes have to be adjusted to match the ingredients. Both where the level of class struggle is low, as in Australia, and in countries where it is high, revolutionaries have to respond flexibly in formulating their tactics in new circumstances.

Trotsky argued that, during the mid-and late 1930s, some small revolutionary groups could expand their experience and working class memberships by entering centrist or left-moving social democratic parties for a relatively short period. The results were ambiguous. During the 1950s, the British Labour Party did provide an environment which helped tiny Trotskyist groups in Britain survive the difficult circumstances of the Cold War and economic boom, when the level of

class struggle was low. By operating inside the BLP they were able to find an audience, including among workers, and some recruits. Local branches and, in particular, the youth organisations of most long-established social democratic parties now tend to be stagnant. The proportion of working class members has been in decline for decades and the scope for discussion about policy and struggles is constrained by the neoliberal convictions of social democratic leaders and an even more intense preoccupation with elections than in the past. The echoes of outside social struggles within such parties are muffled.

Entry into newer left social democratic parties is a more plausible tactic for revolutionaries, although the experiences of entry into *Rifondazione* and *die Linke* have not been encouraging. They suggest that the timing of such operations is crucial. Trotsky's conclusion cited earlier is relevant here: "Entry into a reformist or centrist party in itself does not include a long-term perspective. It is only a stage which under certain conditions can be limited to an episode".<sup>91</sup> Recent developments likewise suggest that short term and disciplined entry, while the host party is moving leftward under the influence of major social conflicts, is more likely to help the construction of a revolutionary group than an operation that lasts for a prolonged period. The balance among the efforts entrists put into recruiting to and consolidating a revolutionary current, relating to struggles in the outside world, and energy devoted to activities in the party's formal structures during their sojourn in the social democratic organisation, is also a crucial issue.

The challenges facing revolutionaries in independent organisations are no simpler. Trade unions in Greece and Spain have had to initiate some strikes in the face of vicious attacks by "socialist" governments on wages, conditions and social security to maintain credibility in the eyes of their members. So far, despite widespread disillusionment with established reformist political and union figures, the influence of the far left has been insufficient to make union officials and reformist parties (including Communist parties) choose between calling strikes that were more than token or to see their hold on the masses displaced by an alternative, revolutionary leadership within the working class.<sup>92</sup>

Our situation and organisations today differ in important ways from the political circumstances and the large Communist parties between the Russian revolution and the mid-1930s. Then, agreements between revolutionary and reformist organisations in classic united fronts could pull workers who were not party or even union members into effective campaigns. But at the core of mass united front actions were the very



numerous, dedicated and often highly disciplined members of large social democratic and Communist parties, and trade unions.

Now, even the largest revolutionary groups are small. Social democratic organisations may still have roots in the working class but these are much weaker. The tasks that dedicated members used to perform – recruiting, getting out the vote, building numbers for protests and assessing the mood of workers – have increasingly been outsourced to companies employing public relations, research and advertising professionals. This pattern and widespread disillusionment with social democracy and unions also mean that the layer of organised reformist party and union militants is less significant as an intermediate cog between the mass of the working class and both those who are most in favour of mass action (revolutionaries) and social democratic leaders who at least verbally endorse serious mobilisations. Under these circumstances those won to participate in campaigns are less likely to be organised members of a social democratic party or even workers with a strong loyalty to union leaders. At present prominent reformists generally help build campaigns, in which revolutionaries also play an organising role, less through the mobilisation of their parties or unions and more because of the media attention and legitimacy their endorsement brings. The presence of such figures on a platform of speakers, list of backers or as committee members, unlike sponsorship by a small revolutionary group, provides reassurance that the campaign can be taken seriously, to people agitated about the issue, and attracts media attention.

Revolutionaries still need to win over people and particularly workers with a reformist consciousness, whether they are members of a social democratic organisation or not. Our success depends on using effective tactics. Some will be old and almost universally applicable. But others will be responses to new conditions. To work out which tactics are appropriate we have to be as clear as possible, even when this is painful or frustrating, about both our changing objective circumstances and the extent of our own forces.

#### Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Here "parties" means political "currents" or "movements": this was before parties in the modern sense had emerged anywhere.
- <sup>2</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, [www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html](http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html).
- <sup>3</sup> Mick Armstrong, *From Little Things Big Things Grow: Strategies for Building Revolutionary Socialist Organisations*, Socialist Alternative, Melbourne, 2007.
- <sup>4</sup> Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*.
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- <sup>11</sup> Draper, *Karl Marx's theory of revolution*, pp.247-9.
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- <sup>39</sup> Hermann Weber, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus: Die Stalinisierung der KPD in der Weimarer Republik*, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, Frankfurt am Main, 1969, p.43.
- <sup>40</sup> Weber, *Die Wandlung*, pp.49-50.
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- <sup>51</sup> Franklin C. West, *A Crisis of the Weimar Republic: A Study of the German Referendum of 20 June*, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1985.

<sup>78</sup> Tom Bramble, *Trade Unionism in Australia: A History from Flood to Ebb Tide*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, 2008, pp.218-232.

<sup>79</sup> This account draws on discussions with Mick Armstrong and Diane Fieldes who were active in peak anti-war bodies in Melbourne, the Victorian Peace Network, and Sydney, the Walk Against War Coalition, and my own recollections of the ACT Network Opposing War, which I convened in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq. For an account that provides useful details but exaggerates the role of the far left, see Pip Hinman, "Lessons of the mass anti-war campaign in Australia", *Links*, 24, 2003, <http://links.org.au/node/49>.

<sup>80</sup> Socialist Alternative, "State of the organisation", *Internal Bulletin* 2, August 2003, p.2.

<sup>81</sup> For the SWP's early perspective on the anti-war movement, see Socialist Workers Party, "Stop the war: an attack on all fronts", *Socialist Review*, 257, November 2001. Also see Simon Rogers, "Major UK demonstrations and protests listed: which one was biggest?", *Guardian*, 28 March 2011.

<sup>82</sup> University and College Union, "News", 15 September 2006, [www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=1823](http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=1823).

<sup>83</sup> Callinicos, "Where is the radical left going?"

<sup>84</sup> John Rees, "Anti-capitalism, reformism and socialism", *International Socialism*, 90, 2001; John Rees, "The broad party, the revolutionary party and the united front", *International Socialism*, 97, 2002.

<sup>85</sup> Joan Molyneux, "The necessity of Respect", *Socialist Review*, February 2004.

<sup>86</sup> See Chris Harman, "The crisis in Respect", *International Socialism*, 117, 2008.

<sup>87</sup> Rees, "Anti-capitalism, reformism and socialism"; Rees "The broad party, the revolutionary party and the united front".

<sup>88</sup> Callinicos, "Where is the radical left going?"; also see Harman, "The crisis in Respect".

<sup>89</sup> Trotsky, "What next?", pp.170; Rees, "The broad party".

<sup>90</sup> Alex Callinicos attempted to link the "united front of a particular kind" with the specific approach of the Comintern, by asserting that "Though an innovation, this extension of the united front tactic isn't completely unprecedented", Callinicos, "Where is the radical left going?". He bolstered this point with a quotation,

mistakenly attributed to the Communist International: "the problem of the United Political Front of Labor in the United States is the problem of the Labor Party". The source was in fact the faction-riven and less authoritative Communist Party of America. This is clear from Callinicos's own source, Theodore Draper's *The Roots of American Communism*, Viking Press, New York, 1957, pp.379, 455, also see Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, Transaction, New Brunswick (New Jersey), 2004 [1957], p.36. Draper in turn relied on a secondary source, Charles Emil Ruthenberg, "Communism in the Open Again", *The Liberator*, 58, February 1923, p.13, who quotes from a declaration by the Central Executive Committee of the Workers Party. Also see Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party of America, "Theses on the United Front of Labor", 29 May 1922, [www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/cpusa/1922/05/0529-ccc-unitedfronttheses.pdf](http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/cpusa/1922/05/0529-ccc-unitedfronttheses.pdf). Callinicos did not consider it worth mentioning that the WP's Federated Farmer-Labor Party "united front" was a fiasco. In any case, the Comintern itself

sometimes used "united front" loosely to mean any kind of combined left activity rather than the tactics developed and, at some points, most effectively applied in Germany. The ECCI for example, conflated affiliation to the British Labour Party with the slogan of "a united revolutionary front against the capitalists", "Appendix to the theses on Comintern tactics; theses on the united front", p.404.

<sup>91</sup> Leon Trotsky, "Lessons of the SFO entry", *The Crisis of the French Section*, 1935-36, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1977 [1935], p.125.

<sup>92</sup> Given the determination of the Greek ruling class and the extent of working class hostility to the cuts, it should be noted, even the 48-hour general strike and the attempt to prevent the budget being passed on 29 June 2011 by blockading parliament was, without plans for more militant action like indefinite strikes and the occupation of workplaces, token, "Greece austerity vote and demonstrations", *Guardian*, 29 June 2011.