

SOME QUESTIONS REGARDING THE UNITED FRONT AGAINST FASCISM

I. On the Qualitative Differences Between Fascism and Bourgeois Democracy, and Dimitrov on the Necessity for the Communist Movement to Recognize (1) the Fact that Fascism is Qualitatively Different than Bourgeois Democracy and (2) the Fact that the Suppression of Bourgeois Democracy is a Prelude to Fascism

A democratic republic is the best possible political shell for capitalism, and, therefore, once capital has grasped this very best political shell..., it establishes its power so securely, so surely, that no change, either of persons, of institutions, or of parties in the bourgeois-democratic republic, can shake this power. (Lenin, State and Revolution)

The accession to power of fascism is not an ordinary succession of one bourgeois government by another, but a substitution for one state form of class domination of the bourgeoisie - bourgeois democracy - of another form - open terrorist dictatorship. (Dimitrov, United Front Against Fascism)

These statements do not contradict each other. They do indicate a qualitative change in the political reaction of the bourgeoisie to deepening capitalist crisis, a change which had not developed fully enough for Lenin to understand while he lived.

Lenin died in January 1924. Mussolini came to power in Italy in October 1922. Lenin was too ill to attend the Fourth World Congress of the Communist International in November 1922. In a written statement to that Congress, he mentioned Italian fascism only in passing, comparing it to the Russian Black Hundreds (terror gangs formed by the Tsarist police to terrorize revolutionaries and Jews; they apparently had a rural base). (Collected Works, V. 33, p. 431) The Congress itself said of fascism:

The fascists are, primarily, a weapon in the hands of the large landowners. The industrial and commercial bourgeoisie are following with anxiety the experiment of ferocious reaction, which they regard as black bolshevism. (Degras, V. I, p. 377)

If you will refer back to p. 87 of the report "The Bourgeois State in Crisis: Fascism," you will see that the June 1923 Comintern analysis of fascism recognizes it as far more than a form of agrarian reaction.

If we accept as correct both the June 1923 analysis and Dimitrov's statement quoted at the top of this page, we must accept that there is a qualitative difference between the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie through bourgeois democracy and the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie through fascism.

I am going to cite the Dimitrov quote again, but this time in its entirety and with the paragraph that follows it.

The accession to power of fascism is not an ordinary succession of one bourgeois government by another, but a substitution for one state

form of class domination of the bourgeoisie - bourgeois democracy - of another form - open terrorist dictatorship. It would be a serious mistake to ignore this distinction, a mistake which would prevent the revolutionary proletariat from mobilizing the broadest strata of the toilers of town and country for the struggle against the menace of the seizure of power by the fascists, and from taking advantage of the contradictions which exist in the camp of the bourgeoisie itself. But it is a mistake no less serious and dangerous to underrate the importance, in establishing the fascist dictatorship, of the reactionary measures of the bourgeoisie which are at present being increasingly initiated in bourgeois-democratic countries - measures which destroy the democratic liberties of the toilers, falsify and curtail the rights of parliament and intensify the repression of the revolutionary movement.

Comrades, the accession to power of fascism must not be conceived of in so simplified and smooth a form, as though some committee or other of finance capital decided on a certain date to set up a fascist dictatorship. In reality, fascism usually comes to power in the course of a mutual, and at times severe, struggle against the old bourgeois parties, or a definite section of these parties, in the course of a struggle even within the fascist camp itself - a struggle which at times leads to armed clashes, as we have witnessed in the case of Germany, Austria and other countries. All this, however, does not detract from the fact that before the establishment of a fascist dictatorship, bourgeois governments usually pass through a number of preliminary stages and institute a number of reactionary measures which directly facilitate the accession to power of fascism. Whoever does not fight the reactionary measures of the bourgeoisie and the growth of fascism at these preparatory stages is not in a position to prevent the victory of fascism, but, on the contrary, facilitates that victory. (Dimitrov, United Front Against Fascism, New Century Publishers, pp. 8-9)

What has Dimitrov said here? Fascism is indeed a different form of bourgeois rule, and to ignore this is to prevent the maximum mass mobilization of the workers and peasants against fascism and to prevent them "from taking advantage" of contradictions among the bourgeoisie. Question. Taking advantage to do what? At the same time, it is equally wrong to ignore repressive measures undertaken in bourgeois-democratic countries which destroy the "democratic liberties" of workers and peasants, as those measures are a prelude to fascism. Therefore, it is the task of the world Communist movement to defend (bourgeois) democracy and thus prevent the establishment of fascism in the various countries.

II. Dimitrov's Call for the United Front Against Fascism, Including a United Front with Social Democracy

In the same presentation, Dimitrov proposed a united front with the Second International:

Comrades, millions of workers and toilers of the capitalist countries ask the question: how can fascism be prevented from coming to power and how can fascism be overthrown after it has been victorious? To this the

Communist International replies: the first thing that must be done is to form a united front, to establish unity of action of the workers in every factory, in every district, in every region, in every country all over the world. Unity of action of the proletariat on a national and international scale is the mighty weapon which renders the working class capable not only of successful defense but also of successful counter-offensive against fascism, against the class enemy.

Is it not clear that joint action by the adherents of the parties and organizations of the two Internationals, the Communist and the Second International, would facilitate the repulse by the masses of the fascist onslaught, and would enhance the political importance of the working class... (Dimitrov, pp. 28-29)

III. Dimitrov: On the Revolutionary Potential of the United Front Against Fascism

After speaking to the fact that one part of the proletariat, the Second International, supports bourgeois "oppression in the colonies and semi-colonies," and that "every step on the road to unity of action directed toward the support (of national liberation struggles) denotes the transformation of the colonies and semi-colonies into one of the most important reserves of the world proletariat, he goes on to say:

The establishment of unity of action by all sections of the working class, irrespective of their party or organizational affiliation, is necessary even before the majority of the working class is united in the struggle for the overthrow of capitalism and the victory of the proletarian revolution.

Is it possible to realize this unity of action by the proletariat in the individual countries and throughout the whole world? Yes, it is. And it is possible at this very moment. The Communist International attaches no conditions to unity of action except one, and that is an elementary condition acceptable for all workers, viz., that the unity of action be directed against fascism, against the offensive of capital, against the threat of war, against the class enemy. This is our condition. (pp. 28-29, emphasis Dimitrov's)

The proposal is plain enough. But accompanying Dimitrov's thesis that such a united front is necessary for the prevention and defeat of fascism is the statement (cited above) that such unity is necessary for the overthrow of capitalism. While the winning over of the majority of the working class to the united struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat was an aim of Comintern united front tactics long before the Seventh Congress, one wonders if its insertion here was meant for those Communists who might resist, or at least have doubts about, the proposed united front with the Second International. If the Second International was still class collaborationist -- and Dimitrov clearly states it was -- what in the Second International had changed to make it a potential (and necessary) ally in the overthrow of capitalism? Why would Social Democracy's fear of and even resistance to fascism want to make it oppose capitalism? Dimitrov explains:

A process of differentiation is taking place in all the Social Democratic Parties. Within their ranks two principal camps are forming: side by side with the existing camp of reactionary elements, who are trying in every way to preserve the bloc between the Social-Democrats and the bourgeoisie, and who furiously reject a united front with the Communists, there is beginning to form a camp of revolutionary elements who entertain doubts as to the correctness of the policy of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie, who are in favor of the creation of a united front with the Communists and who are increasingly coming to adopt the position of the revolutionary class struggle.

Thus fascism, which appeared as the result of the decline of the capitalist system, in the long run acts as a factor of its further disintegration. Thus fascism, which has undertaken to bury Marxism, the revolutionary movement of the working class, is, as a result of the dialectics of life and the class struggle, itself leading to the further development of those forces which are bound to serve as its grave-diggers, the grave-diggers of capitalism. (p. 27)

IV. Dimitrov's Criticism of Past Communist Policies Held Up to Lenin's Contention that a Party's Self-Criticism is a Standard for Determining how Well that Party Fulfills its Obligations to its Class and the Masses

Dimitrov, representing, of course, the Comintern leadership, is critical of "mistakes committed by the Communist Parties" -- but not of Comintern policy or Comintern leadership. In other words, the Comintern is not self-critical. Let us look at Dimitrov's criticism:

We can not avoid referring also to a number of mistakes committed by the Communist Parties, mistakes that hampered our struggle against fascism.

In our ranks there were people who intolerably underrated the fascist danger, a tendency which has not everywhere been overcome to this day. Of this nature was the opinion formerly to be met with in our parties to the effect that "Germany is not Italy," meaning that fascism may have succeeded in Italy, but that its success in Germany was out of the question, because the latter was an industrially and culturally highly developed country, with forty years of traditions of the working class movement in which fascism was impossible. Or the kind of opinion which is to be met with nowadays, to the effect that in countries of "classical" bourgeois democracy the soil for fascism does not exist. Such opinions may serve and have served to weaken vigilance with regard to the fascist danger, and to render the mobilization of the proletariat in the struggle against fascism more difficult.

Dimitrov goes on to criticize such errors as that of the Bulgarian Party's taking a "neutral" attitude in regard to the right-wing coup d'etat of 1923; and those of the Polish and Finnish Parties which ignored indications of and did not realize the nature of fascist "coups" in their countries.

When National-Socialism had already become a menacing mass

movement in Germany, certain comrades, like Heinz Neumann, who regarded the Bruening government as already a government of fascist dictatorship, boastfully declared: "If Hitler's 'Third Empire' ever comes about, it will only be six feet underground, and above it will be the victorious power of the workers."

But if you refer to the report entitled "The Bourgeois State in Crisis: Fascism" you will see that similar, in fact even stronger, statements in the same vein were being made in the official organ of the Comintern, and they continued to be made there after Hitler had come to power.

Our Comrades in Germany for a long time failed to reckon with the wounded national sentiments and indignation of the masses at the Versailles Treaty; they treated as of little account the vacillations of the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie; they were late in drawing up their program of social and national emancipation, and when they did put it forward they were unable to adapt it to the concrete demands and the level of the masses.

In a number of countries the necessary development of a mass fight against fascism was replaced by sterile hair splitting as to the nature of fascism "in general" and by a narrow sectarian attitude in presenting and solving the actual political problems of the Party. (pp. 20-21)

If this criticism is correct, and I believe it is, did not the Comintern and its leadership have something to do with at least some of the errors cited? And wouldn't an open discussion in the Comintern and world Communist movement have strengthened that movement?

Lenin, in "Left-Wing" Communism ..., referring to errors of the German "left," states:

The attitude of a political party toward its own mistakes is one of the most important and surest ways of judging how earnest the party is and how it in practice fulfills its obligations toward its class and the toiling masses. Frankly admitting a mistake, ascertaining the reasons for it, analyzing the conditions which led to it -- that is the earmark of a serious party; that is the way it should perform its duties, that is the way it should educate and train the class, and then the masses... (pp. 50-51, Peking edition)

V. The United Front as Compromise Compared to Lenin's Outlook on Compromise

I think that it can be safely said that the United Front against Fascism was a compromise. That is, revolution in the capitalist countries is no longer at the top of the agenda (if it is indeed on the agenda at all). Defense -- against fascism, against the capitalist offensive, against war -- is now the main task. And that defense is to be carried out by an alliance of "all sections of the working class," including, the class-collaborationist leaders of the Second International. True, Dimitrov does speak of a counter-offensive against fascism (see top of page 184, this report); but the condition for that is the defensive alliance already

referred to. Dimitrov, in justifying the alliance, does not go so far as to say the Social-Democratic movement as a whole has changed, but that a segment of it is becoming revolutionary. (No examples of this are cited, as far as I can see.)

So no longer is revolution on the order of the day (in a capitalist world economic crisis, yet), but the Communists seek an alliance with the class-collaborationist Second International. This is indeed compromise.

What does Lenin say about compromise by Communist organization?

To reject compromises "on principle," to reject the admissibility of compromises in general, no matter of what kind, is childishness, which is difficult even to take seriously. A political leader who desires to be useful to the revolutionary proletariat must know how to single out concrete cases where such compromises are inadmissible, when they are an expression of opportunism and treachery, and direct all the force of criticism, the full edge of merciless exposure and relentless war, against those concrete compromises...

and

There are compromises and compromises. One must be able to analyze the situation and the concrete conditions of each compromise. One must learn to distinguish between a man who gave the bandits money and firearms in order to lessen the damage they can do and facilitate their capture and execution, and a man who gives bandits money and firearms in order to share in the loot. In politics this is by no means always as easy as this childishly simple example. But anyone who sets out to invent a recipe for the workers that would provide in advance ready-made solutions for all cases in life, or who promised that the policy of the revolutionary proletariat would never encounter difficult or intricate situations, would simply be a charlatan. ("Left-Wing" Communism...., pp. 23-24)

and

To carry on a war for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie, a war which is a hundred times more difficult, protracted and complicated than the most stubborn of ordinary wars between states, and to refuse beforehand to manoeuvre, to utilize the conflict of interests (even though temporary) among one's enemies, to refuse to temporize and compromise with possible (even though temporary, unstable, vacillating and conditional) allies -- is this not ridiculous in the extreme? Is it not as though, when making a difficult ascent of an unexplored and heretofore inaccessible mountain, we were to refuse beforehand ever to move in zigzags, ever to retrace our steps, ever to abandon the course once selected and to try others? (pp. 66-67)

And it must be remembered: the struggle against fascism was part of the struggle against the international bourgeoisie. Fascism is, after all, a political stage of capitalism.

VI. Dimitrov's Call for the Anti-Fascist People's Front Held Up To Lenin's Criteria for Alliance with Non-Working Class Elements

Dimitrov goes on to speak of the "Anti-Fascist People's Front:"

In the mobilization of the toiling masses for the struggle against fascism, the formation of a broad people's anti-fascist front on the basis of the proletarian united front is a particularly important task. The success of the entire struggle of the proletariat is closely connected with the establishment of a fighting alliance between the proletariat on the one hand and the toiling peasantry and the basic mass of the urban petty bourgeoisie constituting a majority in the population of even industrially developed countries on the other.

In its agitation, fascism, desirous of winning these masses to its own side, tries to set the toiling masses of the cities and the countryside against the revolutionary proletariat, intimidating the petty bourgeoisie with the bugaboo of the "Red danger." We must turn the spearpoint in the opposite direction and show the toiling peasants, artisans and toiling intellectuals whence the real danger threatens...

Dimitrov refers to the organizations which contain the petty bourgeois masses:

This (heterogeneous social composition) makes it our duty to approach these organizations in different ways... Under certain conditions we can and must bend our efforts to the task of drawing these parties and organizations or certain sections of them to the side of the anti-fascist people's front, despite their chance of attracting these parties and organizations to the side of the people's front, our tactics must under all circumstances be directed toward drawing the small peasants, artisans, handicraftsmen, etc. among their members into the anti-fascist people's front. (pp. 36-38)

Is there anything regarding what Dimitrov has said about the popular front that could be construed as opportunistic or unprincipled?

Lenin points out that "beginning with 1905, (the Bolsheviks) systematically advocated an alliance between the working class and the peasantry" but at the same time never ceased its "relentless ideological and political struggle against the bourgeois revolutionary peasant party." He goes on to say that at the time of the October Revolution "we entered into an informal but very important (and very successful) political bloc with the petty-bourgeois peasantry by adopting the Socialist-Revolutionary agrarian program in its entirety, without a single alteration -- that is we effected an unquestionable compromise in order to prove to the peasants that we did not want to 'steam-roller' them, but to reach agreement with them." ("Left-Wing" Communism..., pp. 69-70)

I understand Lenin to be saying there is nothing wrong with allying with non-working class elements, even parties and organizations, as long as a Communist Party continues to maintain a principled position, as long as it continues to struggle against non-working class ideas - and actions. Lenin's entire concept of political compromise is, of course, based on the

premise that it is being carried out by a Bolshevik-type party steered ideologically and organizationally. I will come back to this premise later, but will say now that the popular front, as presented by Dimitrov here, so far does not seem unprincipled or opportunistic.

VII. Dimitrov's Call for the Government of the United Front -- the Seeds of Opportunism -- as demonstrated by the French "Popular Front" Government. Spain. The CPUSA's "Objective" Support of Roosevelt

Dimitrov speaks of the "Government of the United Front":

If we Communists are asked whether we advocate the united front only in the struggle for partial demands, or whether we are prepared to share the responsibility even when it will be a question of forming a government on the basis of the United Front, then we say with a full sense of responsibility: yes, we recognize that a situation may arise in which the formation of a government of the proletarian united front, or of the anti-fascist people's front, will become not only possible but necessary in the interests of the proletariat. And in that case we shall declare for the formation of such a government without the slightest hesitation.

I am not speaking ("of a government which may be formed after the victory of the proletarian revolution"), but of the possible formation of a united front government on the eve of and before the victory of the Soviet revolution.

What kind of government is this? And in what situation could there be any question of such a government?

It is primarily a government of struggle against fascism and reaction. It must be a government arising as a result of the united front movement and in no way restricting the activity of the Communist Party and the mass organizations of the working class, but on the contrary, taking determined measures against the counter-revolutionary financial magnates and their fascist agents.

At a suitable moment, relying on the growing united front movement, the Communist Party of a given country will declare for the formation of such a government on the basis of a definite anti-fascist platform.

Under what objective conditions will it be possible to form such a government? In the most general terms, our reply to this question will be as follows: under conditions of political crisis, when the ruling classes are no longer in a condition to cope with the mighty upsurge of the mass anti-fascist movement. But this is only a general perspective, without which it is scarcely possible in practice to form a united front government. Only the existence of definite and specific prerequisites can put on the order of the day the question of forming such a government as a politically necessary task. It seems to me that the following prerequisites deserve the greatest attention in this connection.

First, the state apparatus of the bourgeoisie must already be sufficiently disorganized and paralyzed, so that the bourgeoisie can not prevent the formation of a government of struggle against reaction and fascism.

Second, the broadest masses of toilers, particularly the mass trade unions, must be in a violent state of revolt against fascism and reaction, though not ready to rise in insurrection, to fight under Communist Party leadership for the achievement of Soviet Power.

Third, the differentiation and Leftward movement in the ranks of Social Democracy and other parties participating in the united front must already have reached the point where a considerable portion of them demand ruthless measures against the fascists and the other reactionaries, struggle together with the Communists against fascism, and openly come out against that reactionary section of their own party which is hostile to Communism.

Dimitrov continues his discussion of the "government of the united front" by linking it to the discussion that went on at the Fourth and Fifth World Comintern Congresses in 1922 and 1924 over the slogan of a "workers'," or a "workers' and peasants" government. He discusses the "left" and right errors that came out of the earlier discussion at those Congresses. The discussion mainly concerns tactics, but it leads to the following statement by Dimitrov:

And we now emphasize on the one hand, that we are not in the least anxious for such a "workers' government" as would be nothing more or less than an enlarged Social Democratic government. We even prefer to waive calling it a "workers' government," and speak of a united front government which in political character is something absolutely different, different in principle, from all the Social-Democratic governments which usually call themselves "workers' (or Labor) governments." While the Social-Democratic government is an instrument of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie in the interest of the preservation of the capitalist order, a united front government is an instrument of collaboration between the revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat and other anti-fascist parties, in the interest of the entire toiling population, a government of struggle against fascism and reaction. Obviously there is a radical difference between these two things. (pp. 68-72)

VIII. The Alternative to Blum and Roosevelt: Was It Fascism? Was the Communist Movement Strong Enough to Carry out a United Front Policy in a Principled Way?

The reason I have quoted Dimitrov's thesis on the "government of the united front" at such length (I could have and perhaps should have quoted much more) is that it is here I believe that the seeds of opportunism lie.

Dimitrov is telling us that the condition for the "united front government" is a crisis of capitalism where the bourgeoisie is not strong enough to prevent the formation of such a government, but the Communists do not have the mass support to lead a successful proletarian revolution. Another

condition is the willingness of the Social Democrats and others to participate in such a government.

Such conditions never existed simultaneously anywhere I know of, certainly not after 1935 -- except in Spain where a "united front government" was created to resist Spanish -- and Italian and German fascism.

In France, a "popular front" welfare-state type government was created in May 1936 -- with Communist support. The rationalization for the support of that "popular front" government is contained in Dimitrov's thesis on the "government of the united front." This supposed "Anti-Fascist Popular Front" government was not so anti-fascist as to support the Spanish Republic which was fighting for its life against fascism. But the Communists continued to support it until it disintegrated. It was the "anti-fascist" popular front government of France (headed by Leon Blum) which proposed "Non-Intervention" which cut off the Spanish Republic from all military and economic aid while Franco got unlimited help from Italy and Germany. It was "Non-Intervention" which murdered the Spanish Republic-- and was of inestimable assistance to fascism. (see J. Álvarez del Vayo, Freedom's Battle, pp. 66-75)

The position of the Communist Party USA in relation to the Roosevelt administration after 1935 was, in the words of W.Z. Foster, "objective, but not official support for Roosevelt." When he ran against Landon in 1936, the C.P. said "the central issue of the campaign was "democracy versus fascism." (William Z. Foster, History of the Communist Party of the United States, p. 333)

Perhaps some would argue that a rationale for opportunism could be found anywhere in Dimitrov's United Front Against Fascism, or perhaps even in "Left-Wing Communism...". But this is not true. When Lenin talks of the need for compromise and flexibility, he lays out the strictures beyond which such compromise and flexibility can not go. Dimitrov is very careful, it seems to me, when calling for the united front -- and the popular front -- to insist that the Parties must continue to fight for Communist ideas and resist all political moves which would harm the working class. If we accept that there was a need for a united front against fascism (I do), and that, because of fascism, the Communist movement had to go "on the defensive," then nothing Dimitrov has said about the united or popular front deviates from Leninist principles, particularly as found in "Left-Wing Communism..." But when we come to Dimitrov's thesis of the "government of the united front," it seems to me he does not make the distinction which he makes earlier: that between the rule of the bourgeoisie through bourgeois democracy, and its rule under fascism.

For instance, the Communists supposedly supported Blum's government in France because the alternative would have been fascism. But in fact, Blum's government, after having betrayed the Spanish masses to fascism, fell. Was it replaced by a fascist government? No. Did Landon really represent fascism? He did not. Yet the support of Bloom and Roosevelt was predicated on the idea that the only alternative was fascism.

Finally, and this is a question I shall not attempt to answer now:

Were the Parties and the Comintern itself strong enough ideologically and organizationally to deal with the united front against fascism in a principled way without falling into the abyss of opportunism? (And if not, why not?)

IX. Books Used

Alvarez del Vayo, J. Freedom's Battle. Translated by Eileen E. Brooke. New York: Hill & Wang, 1940.

Degras, Jane. The Communist International: Documents, 3 vols., vol. 1: 1919-1922. London: Frank Cass and Company, Ltd., 1956.

Dimitroff, Georgi. United Front Against Fascism. New York: New Century Publishers, 1935.

Foster, William Z. History of the Communist Party of the United States. New York: International Publishers, 1952.

Lenin, V.I. Collected Works, 45 vols. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960. vol. 33: August 1921 - March 1923.

"Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965.