

What is the United Front?

WHEN THE Third International held its founding congress in 1919, and issued the call for the formation of sections in every country, it did so in the expectation that the new Communist Parties would soon replace existing reformist parties as the mass political organisations of working people.

This expectation proved grossly over-optimistic. Even in France, where supporters of affiliation to the Third International won a majority of the SFIO, the rump party established by the anti-Communists retained extensive support. In Germany, although the Communists had built an organisation with hundreds of thousands of members, they succeeded in winning only a minority of workers from their allegiance to the Social Democrats. In Britain the Labour Party was at this time in the process of building a multi-millioned following among the working class and the tiny Communist Party found itself politically marginalised.

From the end of 1921, therefore, the Communist International began a new turn to take account of this unforeseen situation. Whereas previously the emphasis had been on splitting reformist parties in order to establish new Comintern-affiliated organisations, a change of line was adopted which took as its starting point the need for working class unity. This policy was known as the united front.

The policy had two interconnected objectives. The first was to strengthen the divided labour movement against the capitalist class and its parties; the second was to enable the Communists to get a hearing from those workers who still followed the reformists and to demonstrate in practice the superiority of Communist political leadership.

Mass-based CPs such as those in France and Germany could pursue the united front by addressing proposals for joint action directly to the leaders of the reformist parties. At the other extreme, in the case of small organisations like the CPGB which lacked the clout to negotiate on a party to party basis with the Labour leadership, a different approach was required. The tactic adopted here was what Trotsky later called the united front from within.

Up to that point the CPGB had pursued a policy of standing against the Labour Party in elections, often conducting its campaigns on the basis of vehement attacks on the Labour

candidates. This approach was now abandoned, and from 1922 until the onset of the sectarian Third Period phase at the end of the decade the CPGB stood no further candidates against Labour. Instead, it sought to work within and around the Labour Party.

Space precludes a full analysis of the reasons for the eventual failure of the CPGB's strategic reorientation towards the Labour Party. Essentially it arose from CP's insistence on maintaining a formal party structure in the face of mounting repression by the Labour leadership. But initially the turn to the united front marked a big political advance for the CPGB.

How should the method of the united front be applied by Marxists today? Well, as far as the Respect Coalition is concerned, it would at least mean avoiding standing for the London Assembly in marginal constituencies where its intervention could facilitate victory for Tory candidates. This would not only strengthen the labour movement in the face of the main enemy, but would gain Respect a hearing from Labour voters who would consequently be more sympathetic to the proposal that they should vote for Respect on the top-up list. In the trade unions it would mean that the revolutionary left should block with the reformist opposition to Blair in pushing for the unions to take up a fight within the Labour Party. This would advance the interests of the movement as a whole, while allowing the far left to expand its own political influence by demonstrating the effectiveness of its strategy and tactics.

However, as we know to our cost, the self-styled Leninists of today operate on an entirely opposite basis. In the London elections, Respect is standing in every Assembly seat, ignoring the fact that this may lead to Labour defeats and moreover alienate Labour supporters who see Respect as agents of the Tory Party. In the unions, the far left disrupts resistance to New Labour by arguing that there is no possibility of a fightback within the Labour Party and concentrating instead on changing union rules to allow branches to fund far left candidates standing against Labour.

The fundamental flaw in the far left's approach is its false assumption that the time is ripe for building new political organisations to replace the Labour Party, rather than pursuing the united front from within.

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