

The United Front

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1.

THE Executive Committee of the Socialist and Labor International devoted the greater part of its last session to a discussion of the united front problem. The decision arrived at was that no united front between communists and socialists on an international basis was as yet possible. The parties constituting the International may, however, in accordance with their local conditions, decide for themselves whether or not they should enter into united fronts with the communists.

The decision is being criticised bitterly from the right as well as from the left. This, the critics say, shows more than anything else the impotence of the Socialist International. It is afraid of making decisions; it is afraid of giving leadership to its constituent parties; it is afraid of being an International of action. All it aspires to be is an international discussion society. Whenever it is faced with a real issue, it leaves the making of decisions to the constituent parties themselves. If, however, every party is always and on all problems to act at its own risk, independently of other parties, having only its own national interests in mind, heedless of the international situation, why then an International? Of what use is this International which is afraid to act and afraid to lead?

There is considerable truth in this criticism. Sooner or later the socialist movement will have to face the problem of reorganizing and revitalizing the International. But, when this criticism is applied to its decision on the united front problem, it is unjustified. The Socialist International in discussing the united front problem really discussed the unity of the International. Any positive decision for or against the united front

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may have resulted in a split in the International. A number of parties belonging to the International concluded united front agreements with the communists long before this discussion took place. They entered these united fronts because the situations in their respective countries made it both necessary and profitable for them. They could not break up these united fronts without seriously harming themselves. Besides, they are for the united front on principle, and could not submit to the right wing majority without violating their own principles. On the other hand, there are a number of parties within the International that would not, on considerations of principle, as well as of practicability, enter into a united front with the communists. This is especially the case with the large and influential parties like the British Labor Party, the Swedish Socialist Party and others. Not only are these parties violently opposed to communist theory and practice (in this opposition many left socialist parties would agree with them), but, what is of more importance, the communist parties in those countries are merely insignificant sects, with no following and no influence in the labor movement. A united front between a large, influential mass party and a small, insignificant sect, may of course be of great value to the sect, but it is positively harmful to the mass party.

A decision of the Socialist International that would be binding on all parties might have led to a split. Who would have benefited by a split in the Socialist International? Certainly not those who are for unity. Unity is not attained by new splits. It is true that the communists would have greeted a split in the Socialist International with joy. After all, they have more than once frankly stated that they are for a united front because this may, and they hope it will, break up the unity of the socialist movement. There is no doubt that if the communists would have to choose between a new split in the socialist ranks and a united front, they would choose the former. That would help them greatly in their noble work of wrecking the socialist movement. We doubt, however, whether a socialist anywhere would help them in this noble work.

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2.

It is now up to the socialist parties belonging to the Socialist International to decide for themselves whether or not they are for a united front. According to the decision of the N. E. C. of the American Socialist Party, the 1936 national convention will have to make a definite decision on the united front problem. Until that time, those who are for, as well as those who are against, the united front will naturally try to convert the party to their view. The united front problem has been agitating the party for a long time now, and will probably be among the major problems at the next pre-convention discussions as well as at the convention itself.

In all discussions on the united front the Socialist Party is at a disadvantage. The Communist Party spends enormous sums of money, and most of its energy, on its united front propaganda. Dozens of pamphlets, leaflets, appeals, and special letters are distributed particularly among socialist party members. It is true that the tone of the communist literature has changed lately. We do not hear so often from communists now that every non-communist is a traitor, a lackey of the bourgeoisie, a fighter for capitalism and fascism or just a plain faker. Even the profound truth that Norman Thomas is "just now" busy preparing a war against Soviet Russia is not used as often as it used to be. The tenor of the newest literature is falsification of the history of the socialist as well as of the communist movement. The aim of this literature is, above all, to place the guilt for the original split in the socialist and labor movement on the socialists. The tone of the literature is usually one of insinuating innocence. It is an appeal to socialists: You socialists have split the movement. All right, "we" will forgive you that, but how long are you going to keep the movement split? In order "to prove" these falsifications the literature is filled with misquotations, perversions of truths, and downright lies.

Members of the Socialist Party naturally are interested in the united front problem. They want to know something

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about the history of their own as well as other proletarian movements. But there is no socialist literature for them. If a socialist wants to read anything on the history of the movement, on the split, on the rise of communism, on the rise of fascism, on the collapse of the Second International, on the rise and decline of the German republic, on the situation in Soviet Russia, he must either read communist literature or liberal-bourgeois books which usually repeat all of the "communist truths" about socialists. There still are "practical" people in our party who advise us to "bother less about foreign countries and more about America." They do not, even now, realize that a correct understanding of our own problems is impossible without a knowledge, and a detailed and critical knowledge at that, of the experiences of the socialist movement in other countries. As a matter of fact, the rank and file of the Socialist Party do not heed the advice of those "practical leaders" just as they do not take the advice of the leaders not to bother with problems of the future (Road to Power, etc.) But, as there is no socialist literature they get all their information from communist sources. That they don't succumb to communist influence is of course evidence of the great amount of common sense that they possess. Besides the communist way of "telling the truth" is now so well known, that even communists themselves take it with a grain of salt.

In the matter of the united front the absence of socialist literature (even Gus Tylor's pamphlet on the United Front is out of print) is very unfortunate. Due to this lack of correct knowledge members of the Socialist Party sometimes discuss the united front, unwillingly of course, from the communist point of view, and naturally arrive at false conclusions. In the discussion on the united front the question "Who is responsible for the split?" is unavoidable. It is of course easy for one who is informed to show that the socialist and labor movement was deliberately split by the Communist International; that the split was not an accident, but a consciously planned policy on the part of the communists; that the communists honestly believed, and still believe, that splitting socialist parties and

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“reformist” unions is a great revolutionary achievement because it helps destroy the socialist movement which is for them the chief obstacle to the revolution. All that would be necessary would be to reprint the official theses, resolutions and declarations of the Communist International, of the R. I. L. U. and of the Communist Party on this question. One could show that splitting was proclaimed by Lenin himself as one of the main “tactical lines” of communism, and that it has never been given up. As early as May, 1914, Lenin, in speaking of socialists who did not share his views, proclaimed,

“With such people the split is necessary and unavoidable,” and again,

“Unity with these social-chauvinists is a betrayal of the revolution, a betrayal of the proletariat, a betrayal of socialism, desertion to the side of the bourgeoisie, etc.”

At the opening of the second congress of the Communist International the president at that time of the C. I. declared,

“Our fight against the Second International is not a fight between two factions of the same revolutionary proletarian movement. It is not a fight between different streams within the same class, it is practically a class struggle.” *

It will, however, be a mistake on the part of the reader to think that that bitter fight is directed against “the right wing” of the socialists, against “the social-chauvinists”. For Lenin, as well as for Stalin, the left wing of the socialist movement is even worse than the right. Stalin made this very clear when he stated at the sixth congress of the C. I.:

“It was stated that the fight against social democracy is one of the fundamental tasks of the sections of the Comintern. That of course is true but it is not enough. In order that the fight against the S. D. may be carried on successfully, attention must be sharply directed to the question of fighting the so-called left wing of the S. D.”**

When the Communist International at its third congress at last decided to initiate the new tactic of the united front, it

* Lenin—*Problems of the Third International*.

** Stalin—*Leninism* (English), Vol. II, p. 192.

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made no secret about the motives behind this tactic. In books, pamphlets and newspaper articles the "faithful" were instructed that the united front was a new method of destroying the socialist movement. The old method of direct splits had failed. Moreover, in his report to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International Zinoviev had complained that the workers looked upon the communists as the "disintegrators" of the movement.

"Perhaps," Zinoviev (then president of the C. I. and leader of the world revolution) confessed, "they had some reason for doing so. At one time, in our efforts to defend the interests of the workers as a whole, we had to split the old social democratic parties. We should have betrayed the working class had we failed to take this course. It was essential to secure a rallying point for a genuine liberating movement of the working class, and this could only be done by the creation of a communist party. At this period we had to accept the role of secessionists, for only by splitting the old Social Democratic parties could we forge the instrument for the liberation of the working class."*

Some naive communists, however, misunderstood the united front. They simply interpreted it as an effort really to unite the working class. They were chastised and disciplined, and some were even expelled. The united front is not an endeavor to unite the working class but to split it by "unmasking" the "traitors". At the fifth congress of the C. I. Karl Radek "unmasked" the united front by ridiculing it.

"We know," Radek said, "that the social democrats can and will fight. But we propose to them that they should fight with us in order to unmask them . . . but we rather spoil the effect of the unmasking when we announce beforehand, our object is not a common struggle. What we are out for is to unmask you."*

Radek was accused of a right deviation (one of his periodical right-left deviations from which he always suffers). In reply

* *Fourth Congress of the C. I.*, abridged report (English), p. 35.

* *Fifth Congress of the C. I.*, abridged English report, p. 54.

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to Radek, Zinoviev, with the approval of the vast majority of the Congress, declared:

“Let the international proletariat, the S. D. and all our enemies know what our strategical manoeuvres are. The word ‘manoeuvre’ is often interpreted to have a bad meaning, but to a certain extent we can say that all our tactics are manoeuvres. . . . He who thinks that we propose a political amalgamation with the so-called ‘labor parties’ is mistaken. Let all parties know that the opinion expressed here by several comrades, headed by comrade Radek (i.e. to take the united front seriously as an effort to unite the working class. H. K.), is not the opinion of the Communist International.”*

But why bring this “ancient history” in to the discussion? Are we going to punish the communists for their past by opposing a united front at the present time? No, we are not. The history of the splitting activities of the communists is not, per se, an argument against the united front. Before, however, the Socialist Party enters into a united front with the communists, it must be sure that the communists have at last really changed their view on the united front. If the united front is still nothing else but a manoeuvre on the part of the communists to destroy the Socialist Party more effectively, it is clear that it would be nothing short of suicide to oblige the communists.

Have the communists really changed their attitude on the united front? If they have, they have kept it secret. They still maintain and preach the theory of social fascism according to which the direct aim of the socialist movement is to help capitalism out of its difficulties. The Communist International still teaches its adherents that the real enemy of the working class, the enemy against which the chief blows must be directed, is not fascism but socialism.** Is it possible that the communists really want a united front with those whose aim

* *Ibid*, p. 129.

** See the author's “Toward Socialist Reorientation” for direct quotations to this effect.

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it is to help capitalism, to betray the working class, to help engineer a war against Soviet Russia, to break strikes with the help of hired gangsters? In short with the enemies of the working class? It is hard to believe so! If, however, the communists really have changed their attitude, why don't they simply and openly declare it themselves. They know well that until they openly repudiate the social fascist theory, no real united front will be possible because no one will believe that they honestly mean it.

3.

It is said: The united front is not purely a communist issue. It is necessary for the working class. Only a united labor front may fight successfully against the dangers of war and fascism. To this we wholeheartedly agree. There is nothing so important for the labor movement as a united proletarian front. But would an alliance of the socialist and communist parties help or hinder such a united labor front? At present it would hinder rather than help. First of all the communists frankly declare that they do not want a united front of proletarian parties. Earl Browder makes it clear in his article on the united front in the "Communist" for October, 1934, where he says:

"But by no means do we accept the idea which is being carefully cultivated by enemies of united action that the united front means to bring together the S. P. and C. P. with the small groups of renegade leaders like the Trotskyites, the Lovestonites, the Musteites, the Gitlowites, etc., etc. We consider that such a united front has absolutely nothing in common with the needs of the masses."

In other words, the united front is not to be a united front at all. It is to be an alliance of two parties, the S. P. and the C. P. The rest are excluded because the communists are

* In a pamphlet written by Israel Amter, and widely distributed, some of the chapters are headed, "Why do the socialists betray the workers", "Why do the socialists employ gangsters to break strikes", etc. Amter does not ask whether the socialists do these things. He merely "explains" why they do so. This pamphlet was distributed as communist campaign literature.

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“mad” at them. But these are not the only parties and groups that are to be excluded from the united front. In the above quoted article Browder says:

“On the other hand this formulation may mean, and to many people it does mean, the ending of the struggle by the communists against the policy of William Green, Matthew Woll, John L. Lewis, MacMahon and company—the official leadership of the A. F. of L. . . . and we declare that if this is what they mean by united front or conditions for the united front, this condition the communists will never accept. . . .”*

This is supposed to be an answer to the declaration of the N. E. C. of the S. P. that “no united action on specific issues is possible between socialists and communists except on a basis which also gives hope of ending fratricidal strife within the trade union movement.” Earl Browder knows well that the socialists would not dream of demanding or advising the communists to give up their legitimate opposition in the trade unions, or to stop fighting within the trade unions against everything that is bad, obsolete and contrary to the interests of the working class. But this is not what the communists have been doing. Instead of being an opposition within the trade union movement they are its sworn enemy. Not the reform of the trade unions, but their destruction, is the openly declared aim of the communist movement. Dual unions certainly cannot reform the trade unions, and experience has shown that they cannot destroy them either. The communists have learned this from their own bitter experience. All of their dual unions were lamentable, often ridiculous, failures. They brought nothing but harm to the working class and succeeded only in absolutely isolating the communist movement from the living and fighting labor movement. The communists are now “changing their tactic again”. They are dissolving their dual unions and are sending their followers back to the A. F. of L. But it is not because they have decided to

* *The Communist*, October, 1934, p. 956.

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give up their dual union policy. It is because the dual unions have failed and are disintegrating. Jack Stachel makes it very plain in his article in the "Communist" for November that this change of tactics is not a change of policy; it is only a temporary expedient. A writer in the "Workers Age" (Lovestonite organ) asks very rightly of the communists, "What will you do in the reformist trade unions? If you will insist that the A. F. of L. is 'fascist' and 'a section of the employers', then your purpose can be only one,—to destroy the unions. If this be your line then the change in policy is one of merely transferring the destructive virus of dual unionism into the very heart of the trade union movement." * This is exactly what socialists object to. Moreover, this is exactly the most important obstacle in the way of a real united front. As long as the communists will keep to their present trade union policy, the trade unions are practically excluded from the united front, and a united front without organized labor is worthless. It may even become harmful, because such united fronts without organized labor very often become a united front against organized labor.

Are the socialists ready for a united front? The communists love to shout this question from the house tops. There is one answer for socialists. Yes, we are ready. It depends entirely on you. As soon as you liquidate the theory of social fascism, agree to a united front inclusive of all proletarian parties and groups, and give up your harmful and suicidal (for you) trade union tactics, there will be a real united front. The socialists are ready and waiting. It is up to you to make the united front possible. Will you?

Of course, socialist party locals have participated, and will participate, in united front actions with communists as well as with other proletarian groups for specific local actions. But this cannot take the place of a real united front on a national scope. Such a real united front will come as soon as the communists will really be ready for it.

* *The Communist Party and the Trade Unions* by George F. Miles, "Workers' Age", December 15, 1934.