

United Fronts and Political Unity

With the impending formation of a number of national political alliances, a look at past organisational forms has value. The European United Front experience of the 1920s is discussed in this light.

People trying to understand South Africa have often used theories of capitalism formulated in Europe. However, the possible use of Europe's political experience has been somewhat neglected.

Borrowing from European political experience is just as difficult as borrowing from European theory. In both cases, abstraction has to be made from European specifics. After this, the resulting general concepts/principles/tactics have to be made concrete again and evaluated in terms of their relevance to South Africa. This article, however, does not presume to go much further than setting out some European experience from which the reader can abstract and re-apply what is useful.

The European experience to be discussed is the 'United Front' strategy and tactics practised by communists in the 1920s. However, because communism is illegal in South Africa, it is necessary to make certain points before the discussion proper begins.

UNITED FRONTS AND POLITICS

The question of united fronts, blocs and alliances is, as the conservative US sociologist Selznick notes, basic to all politics. In this respect, abstractions made from this article may be useful to understanding such South African politics as the trade union unity talks, the United Democratic Front (UDF), Buthelezi's South African Black Alliance (SABA), Conservative Party - Herstigte

Nasionale Party relations, the National Forum Committee, etc, and not simply the role of communists in South Africa. In fact, it is even questionable whether the European United Front experience as described in this article is relevant to the activity of the South African Communist Party (SACP). As EH Carr writes of the European experience: 'One of the corollaries of the united front was the increased importance attached to legal as opposed to underground activities: parties were to appear openly and woo the alliance of other parties for limited objectives, while at the same time proclaiming their own wider purposes. But such a policy could have no application in countries where communist parties were under a legal ban, and existed only as conspiratorial organisations'.

The European United Front thus refers to an experience where 'front' means 'an alignment against an enemy formation' (Selznick), and not 'front' in the sense of a 'facade'. For South African relevance then, abstraction needs to be made from the European fact that specifically (open, legal) communist parties were involved. In essence, one is looking at a type of general strategy and tactics. Although this was worked into an explicit policy by European communists in the 1920s, it is an element of politics in general. Needless to say, therefore, a group that makes use of united front strategy and tactics (and probably every political group in South Africa does to some extent), is not thereby furthering the aims of communism. The politicking between the Conservative and Herstigte Nasionale Parties over a conservative united front against the National Party illustrates this point well.

THE UNITED FRONT IN EUROPE

The United Front policy in Europe was explicitly laid out by the Third International (Comintern) in December 1921. The Comintern had been formed in 1919, and helped organise and bring together communist parties from around the world. With some changes in emphasis, the United Front carried on until 1928. That year saw the so-called 'third period' when the Third International dropped the United Front policy in the belief that it would weaken the revolutionary upsurge expected out of the coming capitalist depression. In 1934 the United Front was revived in a new form - the Popular Front - and this continued until after World War II. The focus in this article is on the period before 1928, although some comments will be made on the Popular Front.

In practical terms, the United Front boiled down to ongoing joint action between communist and socialist parties over limited, not especially revolutionary issues in which most workers had a conscious interest. Examples of these issues were bread, clothing, housing, tax, political rights and freedoms, peace and war. Together with two socialist Internationals, the Comintern drew up the following United Front demands: an eight-hour working day; a struggle against unemployment; aid to the Bolsheviks for famine relief in Russia; and so on. The Bolshevik party paper, Pravda, called for world wide demonstrations by a 'union of workers, communists, anarchists, social-democrats (ie socialists), non-party workers, independents, and Christian democrats against capital'. In some cases, joint action was through direct liaison between organisations on specific campaigns. In other cases, intermediate bodies were set up, and organisations in the United Front sent representatives or became affiliated to these. Examples of such bodies were the National Unemployed Workers' Movement and the National Minority Movement in Britain.

There was a lot more to the United Front, however. The reasons for the policy are important. The immediate boost was successful united action against a right wing coup by the German socialist and communist

parties in 1920. But there were also more general reasons behind the communist movement's use and development of the United Front as a longer-term strategy. Reflecting on the Comintern's adoption of the policy, the organisation's president Zinoviev said it was taken up because:

- * communists did not have majority support in the Western working class;
- * the socialist parties were still very strong;
- * communists were under attack and on the defensive;
- * decisive battles were not on the immediate agenda.

This gave rise to the United Front slogan, 'To the masses!'

Clearly, this differs from the context of united mass action in South Africa - not all of which is defensive, for instance. The United Front as discussed in this article therefore must be weighed up in terms of the ebbing of the post-war revolutionary tide in Europe in the 1920s; in terms of a capitalist economic and political offensive against the working class; and in terms of workers still under the sway of reformist parties and unions.

From this outline of the context of the United Front, it is clear that the problem for the communist parties at the time - winning majority support in the working class - depended on destroying the hold of the socialists over the workers. For the communists, this was one key part of the United Front: the policy was partly an offensive against reformism in the working class. The other key part of the United Front was its role as a defensive policy against capital and the capitalist state. But there was a tension between these two parts. The offensive part meant conflict within the working class; the defensive called for working class unity.

The problem of offense vs defence was closely linked to the question of what united action with socialists actually meant in class terms. The United Front provided for joint action between organisations with a worker or peasant base, and even with radical petty bourgeois strata (eg the Radical Party in Bulgaria). But it excluded action with bourgeois groupings. (The Popular Front included bourgeois groupings in the struggle against fascism - the latter being defined

by Dimitrov, a theorist of the Popular Front, as the naked terroristic dictatorship of the most reactionary section of the bourgeoisie). The United Front meant the joint struggle of the working masses and their organisations to combat the bourgeoisie as a whole, and not collaboration with it or any of its parties. Such collaboration was seen by communists as subordinating the interests of the masses to the bourgeoisie in return for small rewards to some parties, groups and individuals. While the United Front pooled efforts against capital, collaboration with the bourgeoisie was seen as disorganising workers and their organisations.

The issue in the 1920s was whether the socialist organisations were the left wing of the bourgeoisie, or the right wing of the proletariat. Clearly the socialists were neither purely one nor the other. However, the question of whose interests the socialists objectively served had great importance for the communist parties in deciding whether they should be opposed or won over. If the socialists were the left wing of the bourgeoisie, then a united front with them against the bourgeoisie was a contradiction in terms.

As things turned out, many socialists did form united fronts in the 1920s - but with the bourgeois parties against the communists. Given this role, most communists tended to diagnose the socialists as the left wing of the bourgeoisie. Correspondingly, the United Front became less a joint defence against capital and more a means of attacking the socialists.

The question of the political class character of the socialists is very specific to Europe at the time. In South Africa, not only classes but also internal colonial structures and groupings have a material reality. Thus a national democratic front is probably more relevant here than are the European United and Popular Front experiences. Nonetheless, there may be some general lessons in the European case for understanding South Africa.

The experience of the Popular Front, for example, may be useful in understanding the political class character of the black petty bourgeoisie. The Popular Front - as a defensive unity - was based on the lowest common denominator of anti-

fascism. This explicitly included sections of the petty bourgeoisie and small capitalists. Ruined by the 1929 depression and the resulting monopolisation in industry, these two groups had given crucial support to fascism in a vain search for relief measures. When fascism in fact acted in the interests of monopoly capitalism, these two groups 'came up for grabs' by other interests. The Popular Front hoped to win their support in smashing fascism in the short-term, and also had the long-term goal of winning members over to the proletariat's side - getting them to commit 'class suicide'. This example shows the dire need for united front and popular front tactics to be applied - not formalistically and ahistorically - but with regard to the class and political line-up in each situation. Evaluating the politics of the black petty bourgeoisie in South Africa requires a study of concrete historical realities, and not merely abstract declarations.

Given the reactionary role of the socialists in the 1920s, the United Front came to be seen largely as a way to destroy the influence of the socialists as a first necessary step to winning the majority of the working class over to the communist parties. This did not mean that the role of the United Front as a defence against capital now fell away. Communists still offered unity to the socialists. They argued that if the latter refused the offer, they would be exposed as sell-outs with no real interest in the working class issues to be fought for. The onus for divisions in the working class would be on them, and this could give a propaganda coup to the communists. (This tactic was recently evident in HNP - CP unity overtures in the Soutpansberg/Waterberg by-elections).

On the other hand, the communists argued, if the socialists did agree to united action, this was all the better. Defensive action could be carried out, and if the socialists refused to take this to its logical and eventual conclusion, they would be shown up for what they were. More than this, through the United Front communists would have had access to the socialists' rank-and-file supporters and the chance to win them over. Unity here would at least have served as a bridge

between the communists and the working class majority. Furthermore, out of the united action, the socialist rank-and-file could be won over not just to general communist principles, but also to communist organisational leadership.

In the view of Gramsci, a leader in the Italian Communist Party, the intermediate slogans and demands of the United Front formed a bridge to the Communist Party's own slogans, and helped the party assemble broad forces behind it. Other communists said that the minimum demands and first-level organisations of the United Front would link the masses to the communist parties as a second-level organisation with a maximum programme. Gramsci also pointed out that although the minimum demands of the United Front were the same as those of the socialists, they would serve as a form of struggle against these very people. Faced with the test of deeds, the socialists would unmask themselves. Action on minimum demands could also give communists the chance to expose the class relations and power underlying the daily lot of workers. As the 1920s wore on, and the socialists became more reactionary, the prospects of the United Front became even less an effective defence against capital and increasingly an offensive against the socialists. This is one of the two main differences between the United Front and the Popular Front. The latter was planned and practised mainly as a defensive struggle against fascism. (The other main difference between these two forms of struggle was, as discussed above, that as a defence against fascism the Popular Front included bourgeois democrats. It was therefore wider than the worker (and in some cases peasant and radical petty bourgeoisie) based United Front. The question that could be asked in a South African context is how cases of united action balance the internal-offensive and external-defensive elements.

An important part of the United Front activity was that it needed no compromise from any partner. The communist parties did not abandon any major programme goal, nor their independence as parties in the United Fronts. The United Front for the communist parties was therefore neither a retreat nor an effacement, but a general, concrete, anti-capitalist platform.

One problem in this was that the socialists were wary of a unity that could destroy their influence. Comintern secretary Radek said of the socialists that 'we propose that they should fight with us in order that we may unmask them'. The socialist response - as voiced by the Belgian leader in the reformist Second International, Vandervelde - was predictable: 'An appeal is made for union for the realisation of the united front, but no secret is made of the intention to stifle us and poison us after embracing us'. This is partly why the socialists in general responded in lukewarm terms to the United Front overtures.

On the other hand, the United Front was a two-edged sword: where it was realised, it not only gave the communists access to socialist rank-and-file, but vice versa. The communists began to feel the negative effects of this at a conference with the reformist socialist Internationals in 1922. A problem in united front action, therefore, involves an assessment of which goals the action is advancing most.

In response to this problem, the communist parties by 1923 began to strongly re-emphasize several principles. These were the right and duty of communist parties to keep a separate identity, organisation and doctrine within United Fronts; to keep on propagating their long-term aims; and to criticise their temporary allies in the United Fronts. Unity, it was re-iterated, was to be only in practical action over definite common goals. The problem in all of this for the communist parties was to distinguish unity that compromised their independence from the day-to-day need to work together on issues that all workers had a conscious interest in. The communist parties wanted to take part in the United Fronts - but without becoming dissolved into them.

The problem of the independence of the communist parties needs to be seen in historical context. Most of these parties were only a few years old in 1921, and most had arisen out of bitter splits with the long-standing (reformist) socialist parties. Lenin, in encouraging the formation of the Italian communist party out of the left wing of the Italian socialist party, had advised this wing to first

break with the socialist party, and then to form an alliance with it. This was the same line that Lenin had put forward 20 years earlier on Bolshevik - Menshevik relations: 'Before uniting, and in order to unite, we first decisively and definitely draw a line of separation'. But this was easier said than done. On the one hand, leftists in the new communist parties wanted to keep their distance from their former (socialist) parties. They felt that the communist parties were still immature and would be set back by joint action with the socialist parties. The danger of sectarianism lurked in this leftist argument. On the other hand, rightists in the communist parties leaned towards unity with the socialists at any cost - even to the extent of 'liquidationism', i.e. the re-absorption of the communist party into the socialist party. In this rightist position was the possibility of getting bogged down in short-term aims, and of opportunism. Between the extremes of giving an icy shoulder to the socialists, and an embrace leading to fusion with them, the United Front had to develop. The United Front was to involve a unity of aims and organisations, not an identity between them.

In Italy, distinctions were made between types of joint struggle in the context of this problem. Gramsci used the concept of fusion to refer to the merging of various political groups with the Italian communist party. This differed from a bloc (or alliance) between the communist party and separate independent political groups. The bloc in turn differed from the united front for Gramsci in that it involved closer collaboration between participants than did the latter. Gramsci at the time was arguing for the formation of a bloc between the Italian communist party and the left wing 'Maximalist' faction of the Italian socialist party. This bloc would, in his view, be part of a wider united front with other political organisations in the working class (as well as from the peasantry). (In South Africa, the UDF may be closer to Gramsci's bloc concept. A united front, in Gramsci's sense, would be the UDF in joint action on specific issues with groups outside it such as certain trade unions, the Black Sash, etc).

Another problem relating to socialists

getting more mileage out of the United Front than the communists, was the actual organisational form of united front activity. After socialists 'sold out' the German revolution of 1923, communists became very critical of 'United Fronts from above'. This type of joint action involved only the leaders of the constituent organisations (as for example in parliamentary coalitions - or the South African Black Alliance). Certain left communists counterposed a United Front 'from below' in either/or terms to a United Front 'from above'. However, the Comintern pointed out that a United Front from above could not always be replaced by one from below - as desirable as that might be. The fact of the matter was that the socialist leaders often could not simply be by-passed or skipped over. Gramsci argued that a frontal attack on socialist leaders from the outside was ineffective, and that real working class unity and mobilisation of socialist rank-and-file was needed to successfully expose the socialist leaders. Gradually the line emerged that United Fronts 'from above' were acceptable only if combined with vigorous propaganda to separate the masses from their socialist 'mis-leaders'. Talks with these leaders were to be public so that the blame for breakdown, or for the betrayal of agreements, could be clearly placed.

Where possible, however, the United Front was to be applied mainly from below. The fourth Comintern congress noted that 'the true realisation of the tactics of the united front can only come "from below", by taking the lead in factory committees, committees of action, and such other bodies in which members of other parties and non-party elements would associate themselves with communists'.

For his part, Gramsci advised:

1. We must not continue to make en bloc counterpositions, but must distinguish between leaders and mass base.
2. We must find all elements of disagreement between the leaders and the mass base and deepen these, enlarge them, generalise them politically'.

The question of the organisational form - 'from above' or 'from below' - may be relevant to understanding cases of united political action in South Africa.

A further problem about organisational forms in the United Front related to socialist political parties on the one hand, and socialist trade unions on the other. Although not clearly debated or used, it does seem that the United Front was applied differently to each case. With socialist (and other non-communist working class) parties, the United Front aim was generally to split them in the hope of bringing the mass of their supporters over to the communist party. However, in the case of non-communist trade unions, splitting was discouraged. Instead, United Front action with these bodies was aimed at winning support from union members to change the unions from within.

This difference seems to have arisen from the specific political conditions at the time (as in Italy), and was also linked to developments in Profintern, the Red International of Trade Unions. However, it is also possible that the distinction made between parties and unions reflects a more general view that while trade unions are mass worker organisations that can encompass a wide variety of political beliefs, political parties are generally mutually exclusive and competitive. It is worth, nonetheless, noting Gramsci's warning at the time not to fetishise any particular form of organisation, but to adapt to the terrain offered by reality. Again, this may be relevant to South Africa, especially in analysing local experience in the light of foreign experience.

REFERENCES

Writings referred to in the text, or consulted by the author, are:

Carr, EH, The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923, volume 3, Penguin, 1977.

Claudin, F, The Communist Movement. From Comintern to Cominform, Penguin, 1975.

Dimitrov, G, Selected Works, Volumes 1 and 2, Sofia Press, 1972.

Gramsci, A, Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926, International Publishers, 1978.

Guerin, D, Fascism and Big Business, Pathfinder, 1979.

Selznick, P, The Organisational Weapon, 2nd revised edition, The Free Press, 1960

Collection Number: AK2117

DELMAS TREASON TRIAL 1985 - 1989

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: **Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand**

Location: **Johannesburg**

©2012

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of the collection records and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document is part of a private collection deposited with Historical Papers at The University of the Witwatersrand.