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The True Nature of a Revolutionary Marxist Party and Its Common Distortions

Ann Roberston and Bill Leumer

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The following passages, written by Leon Trotsky, appear in "A Letter to the Convention of the French Communist Party" (October 1922) and is included in *The First 5 Years of the Communist International, Volume 2*.^{*} Virtually all parties in the U.S. today that call themselves Marxist are guilty of the error that Trotsky is describing as rampant in France at the time of his writing. Here is how he profoundly outlined the problem:

Nowhere else was there such a tenacious reign of revolutionary and pseudo-revolutionary sects as in the French labor movement. The dimmer were the prospects of the social revolution, all the more did each grouping, faction and sect strive to convert itself into a self-sufficient, shut-in little world. Sometimes these factions fought each other for influence...Each little group, especially its bureaucracy, regarded its very existence as an end in itself...

The Communist Party did not come into being so as to exist merely as one faction in the proletariat alongside the Dissidents, the anarcho-syndicalists and the rest but rather in order to shake these conservative groupings and factions to their foundations; to lay bare their complete incompatibility with the needs and tasks of the revolutionary epoch and therewith to impel the proletariat to become aware of itself as a class, all of whose sections are dynamically joined together by the united front against the bourgeoisie and its state. A parliamentary socialist organization or a propaganda sect can remain for decades within one and the same framework which assures it a few parliamentary posts or a certain outlet for pamphlets. *But the party of the socialist revolution is obliged to learn in action how to fuse together the majority of the working class, utilizing to this end every opportunity for mass action that opens up.* [Emphasis added.] The outlived groupings and factions are interested in preserving intact and immutable all the barriers dividing the working class into segments. We, on the other hand, have a vital stake in pulling down these barriers of conservatism and in teaching the working class to follow our example. Herein lies the whole meaning of the united front policy, a meaning that derives directly from the social revolutionary essence of our party."

* *The First 5 Years of the Communist International, Volume 2*, page 168, Monad Press, 1972.

What Trotsky is describing is an error committed by almost every group in the U.S. that considers itself Marxist. These parties commonly aim only at recruiting to their own small party, not first and foremost at trying to unite the working class to put up a fight by creating a united front formation. In so far as they do participate in united front formations, they are there only to recruit to their own particular sect.

United fronts exist when various workers' organizations — for example, political parties, unions, community groups, and so on — or workers as individuals come together to fight for some common demand. In other words, these united fronts involve workers in so far as they belong to a single class, not in so far as they belong to a single political organization or party. They serve to unite workers who want to fight for a specific demand or demands and are consequently indispensable for waging a struggle, since the more people who are engaged, the greater the prospects for success.

In so far as an antiwar demonstration has been organized by workers as individuals or as representatives of various political parties, it constitutes a united front. Here people come together because of their common commitment to end the war. Trade unions are also united fronts. They consist of workers affiliated to different political parties, or to none at all, and they pursue specific, limited demands such as higher wages, better working conditions, and so on. In all these cases, workers can maintain allegiance to their different political perspectives and unite only on the single demand or several demands that they have in common.

The idea that one can be a revolutionary Marxist simply by recruiting to a particular party is an error that is often committed by people who are relatively new to Marxism. The problem is particularly prevalent in historical periods (such as the last several decades in the U.S.) where workers have failed to unite in order to wage large-scale struggles, except as a rare exception. Unfortunately, given the state of Marxism in the U.S. today, most people who consider themselves Marxists have not been exposed to powerful and effective united front actions where they could have drawn the proper conclusions. Consequently, they tend to regard united front struggles, whether over wages or the war or bailing out the working class or whatever, as less advanced or relevant than the propaganda of a particular party calling for socialism, simply because the fight for a higher wage, for example, seems so mundane while calls for socialism seem so radical. In fact, in an important sense, these struggles are more advanced than merely dispensing propaganda, as will be explained below. Another reason Marxist parties tend to view recruiting to their own ranks as the supreme goal stems from the fact that it is a relatively simple undertaking. One can raise a few arguments and if the people addressed are receptive, they might join. On the other hand, leading workers in a battle requires, aside from courage, a sophisticated knowledge of one's coworkers, of the opponents one is up against, and the appropriate strategy and tactics to be employed.

What Trotsky is doing in the above passage is explicating the abstruse passage from the Communist Manifesto where Marx and Engels declare: “The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mold the proletarian movement.”

The reason why this passage is so difficult to understand is that it contains a paradox. In a sense, a genuine Communist Party *is* separate or different from other working class parties. But it is only separate in this sense: it seeks to unite all workers, regardless of their political affiliation, so that they can collectively fight for their common interests, no matter how modest they may be. It aims at bringing workers together *as a class*, not as members of a single political sect. In other words, the Communist Party, when it functions correctly, is focused first and foremost on uniting workers and developing class consciousness; it is not focused on setting itself in competitive opposition to other working class parties where it would constitute itself as an end in itself, as the other parties do. This means that the Communist Party is separate only in so far as it seeks to unite workers who want to put up a fight. So in a deeper sense, it is not separate at all; it is the bond that unites the working class and in so far as it performs this function, it provides genuine leadership.

In contrast, most workers’ parties think their separation is a virtue and seek to promote it in all circumstances. When they attend antiwar demonstrations or trade union events, they are there only to sell their own respective publications. They are not there to promote the united front. They use the united front to promote themselves.

Promoting the united front means being actively engaged with workers who want to fight for their own self-interests. Here one aims at bringing workers together, suggesting tactics that could be employed in a particular situation (e.g., reaching out to other unions and the community for support), and proposing demands and slogans (e.g., tax the rich), and so on. This perspective means that as long as workers are not interested in putting up a fight, Marxists will not wield significant influence. But once workers want to fight, then this perspective will function as a pole of attraction for anyone who is serious about winning.

In the above passages, Trotsky is outlining two essentially opposed conceptions of the relation of the revolutionary party to the working class. According to the first conception, which he criticizes, the party exists as a distinct and separate entity from the working class, which it regards as lacking the proper socialist consciousness. Such a party considers its role as introducing socialist ideas into the working class through propaganda, i.e., through their literature, educational forums, and so on. Winning members to its organization is conceived as its reason for existing. Often when struggles break out around specific issues, such parties end up simply issuing commands (e.g., for a general strike, or for the establishment of a workers’ party, or they recite incantations (such as 30 hours of work for 40 hours of pay), regardless of the circumstances they find themselves in, because these parties fail to engage with workers on a daily basis and are even

contemptuous of the workers' level of consciousness, including how workers have defined their struggle. Or, more subtly, they proclaim that nothing can be accomplished at this moment in history and content themselves with urging workers to attend their forums or conferences. For these parties, *they* are what is important, not workers in their mundane, miserable conditions fighting for what they, the pseudo-Marxists, consider merely modest demands.

The kind of party that Trotsky endorses focuses on encouraging workers to put up a fight. It starts by attempting to ascertain the current level of consciousness of workers who are engaged in a struggle in order to help raise this consciousness by providing insightful analyzes of the particular situation and suggestions regarding how best to conduct the fight.

This class struggle, united front approach is crucial for a number of reasons.

1. Successful struggles can lay the groundwork for even more ambitious struggles in the future. If workers conduct a strike and win all their demands, or the most important ones, they are emboldened to raise even more ambitious demands at the next opportunity. One successful struggle can rapidly lead to many more.
2. People's consciousness, in the final analysis, is altered above all by the experiences they have in the class struggle. Once working people have the experience of conducting a collective, victorious struggle, their outlook is transformed. What seemed impossible to accomplish yesterday seems entirely possible today, given that one is no longer operating as an isolated, powerless individual but as a member of a collective, organized, fighting unit. Workers gain confidence in the historical power they can wield when organized on a class basis. And they are fortified with the lessons they have acquired through their past struggles regarding the most effective tactics to employ. They acquire a clearer conception of the antagonistic relation between classes. They come to understand that they can only rely on themselves for success, not, for example, on the Democratic Party, which is only prepared to provide empty promises and a few crumbs to keep up the appearance of support. In the final analysis, workers come to realize that they need their own political party. Those who have participated in successful struggles and who have mastered all the lessons this experience provided are then in a position to lead future struggles on a class struggle basis. This entire experience is an example of what Karl Marx argued about theory, namely it becomes a material force when grasped by the masses. And through this experience, workers gradually acquire consciousness of themselves as members of the working class.
3. One of the most fundamental tenets of Marxism lies in the claim that as long as classes exist, history will only progress through a process of class struggle. The rich and powerful have never relinquished their privileges and lavish wealth without a fight. Moreover, a revolutionary upheaval will not emerge through some natural, evolutionary process, nor will it erupt because various self-appointed, "messianic"

leaders issue commands to an otherwise passive, dull working class. As Marx has argued, the emancipation of the working class will only be achieved by the working class itself. This means that workers must become adept at fighting in order to mount a successful revolution, and the united front, aimed at winning the demands that workers have defined for themselves, provides a basic education in the principles of class warfare.

4. As workers, through the united front, begin to mount victories where, for example, they win higher wages, or stop the war, or force the government to institute single-payer health care, or stop home foreclosures, or force the government to tax the rich in order to create a massive job program or raise the quality of education, these successes will attract others who want to put up a fight. And in this way, eventually the majority of the working class can be won over to a class struggle movement where it can dedicate itself to creating a society that is run in the interests of the majority, not for a tiny wealthy minority.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) of the U.S., before it rapidly degenerated in the early 1980s, embraced the fighting conception of a revolutionary Marxist party that Trotsky outlined above. By leading the historic Teamster struggles in Minneapolis in the 1930s, those who later founded the SWP demonstrated that they could rise to the challenge of leading a working class struggle. Here is how James Cannon*, one of those leaders, described the distinctive essence of the Workers Party, which was a precursor of the SWP:

We want a fighting party, and that is the difference between us and other political organizations claiming the support of the workers. The difference between us and the Socialist Party or the Farmer-Labor Party or the Gompers bureaucracy does not arise just because we declare for the final revolution and they do not, nor because we are willing to hold before the workers the final goal and all of these others are not, but because, on the basis of the class struggle, on questions of bread and butter, on housing, on labor organization, wages and hours, they are afraid to fight, and the Workers Party says it will fight on every single one of these issues. That is the difference between a betrayers' organization, a cowardly organization, and a workers' organization." (**)

* James Patrick "Jim" Cannon (1890-1974) was an American Communist, known primarily as the founding leader of the Trotskyist movement in the United States, eventually founding the Socialist Workers Party.

** Speeches for Socialism, Chapter 1, page 26, Pathfinder Press, 1971.