

The role of the working class in the policy of United Front and Popular Front

1. Three years ago we published an article entitled *The tactics of United Front and Poplular Front in the political strategy of the communist movement* (appeared on "Teoria e Prassi" n. 24 and, in a synthetic form, on "Unity and Struggle" n. 23, organ of ICMLPO).

In that article we reconstructed the historical origins of the tactics of proletarian United Front and of anti-Fascist Popular Front promoted by the VII Congress of the Communist International (1935), the struggles engaged by communist parties in order to defeat the opportunistic right-wing and ultraleft-wing deviations, the political and social conditions indispensable for the formation of United Front and Popular Front governments. And, in the end, we referred to the important experiences of workmen's and people' blocks under way in Tunisia, Palestine, Mexico, Ecuador, France and Spain.

In the present contribution we intend to turn a specific attention to the fundamental role of the working class in both the tactics, with a particular reference to the two experiences of the French and Spanish Popular Fronts in the Thirties of the XX century, both rich of lessons for the construction of the Popular Fronts in the present phase of the class struggle at national and international level.

2. In his report to the 7th Congress, George Dimitrov expressed himself like this:

«It would be insufficient to rest content with the conclusion of a pact providing for joint action and the formation of contact committees from the parties and organizations participating in the united front, like those we have in France, for instance. That is only the first step. The pact is an auxiliary means for obtaining joint action, but by itself it does not constitute a united front. A contact commission between the leaders of the Communist and Socialist Parties is necessary to facilitate the carrying out of joint action, but by itself it is far from adequate for a real development of the united front, for drawing the widest masses into the struggle against fascism. The Communists and all revolutionary workers must strive for the formation of elected (and in the countries of fascist dictatorship -- selected from among the most authoritative participants in the united front movement) nonparty class bodies of the united front, at the factories, among the unemployed, in the working class districts, among the small towns-folk and in the villages. Only such bodies will be able to include also the vast masses of unorganized working people in the united front movement».

Regarding the formation of People's Fronts, extremely clear was Dimitrov's directive:

« In mobilizing the mass of working people for the struggle against fascism, the formation of a wide anti-fascist People's Front on the basis of the proletarian united front is a particularly important task. The success of the whole struggle of the proletariat is closely bound up with the establishment of a fighting alliance between the proletariat, on the one hand, and the labouring peasantry and basic mass of the urban petty bourgeoisie who together form the majority of the population even in industrially developed countries, on the other».

But, in view of the different social and political conditions existing in the various countries where one ought to face the Fascist menace, some perplexities and uncertainties appeared among the communists about the priority to assign to the construction of the one and the other Front.

On this particular problem, the solution suggested by Dimitrov in his closing speech was inspired by the principles of marxist dialectics:

«Some comrades are quite needlessly racking their brains over the problem of what to begin with - the united proletarian front or the anti-fascist Popular Front.

Some say that we cannot start forming the anti-fascist Popular Front until we have organized a solid united front of the proletariat.

Others argue that, since the establishment of the united proletarian front meets in a number of countries with the resistance of the reactionary part of Social Democracy, it is better to start at

once with building up the Popular Front, and then develop the united working class front on this basis.

Evidently, both groups fail to understand that the united proletarian front and the anti-fascist Popular Front are connected by the living dialectics of struggle; that they are interwoven, the one passing into the other in the process of the practical struggle against fascism, and that there is certainly no Chinese wall to keep them apart».

Therefore, the detailed and precise study of the concrete situation and of the relations of force among the classes in every particular situation and in every national reality will indicate to communists where they have to direct their efforts, that is from where to begin, without never forget that, as Dimitrov vigorously underlined, *«the unity of action of the working class itself»* is *«the guiding force»* of the construction of a broader front.

3. The Dimitrov's political indications were confirmed by the Resolution adopted by the 7th Congress at the end of its works ("Resolution on the offensive of Fascism and the tasks of the Communist International in the fight for the unity of the working class against Fascism", adopted on August 20th, 1935):

«For a successful struggle against the offensive of capital, against the reactionary measures of the bourgeoisie, against fascism, the bitterest enemy of all the toilers, who, without distinction of political views, have been deprived of all rights and liberties, it is imperative that unity of action be established between all sections of working class, irrespective of what organisation they belong to, even before the majority of the working class unites on a common fight platform for the overthrow of capitalism and the victory of the proletarian revolution. But is precisely for this very reason that this task makes it the duty of the Communist Parties to take into consideration the changed circumstances and to apply the united front tactics in a new manner, by seeking to reach agreements with the organisations of the toilers of various political trends for joint action on a factory, local, district, national and international scale.

[...] In order to develop the united front movement as the cause of the mass themselves, Communists must strive to secure the establishment of elected (or, in the countries under fascist dictatorship, selected from the most authoritative participants in the movement) non-party class organs of the united front in the factories, in the working-class districts, among the small townfolk, and in the villages. Only such bodies, which of course, should not supplant the organisations participating in the united front, will be able to bring into the united front movement also the vast unorganized mass of the toilers, will be able to assist in developing the initiative of the masses in the struggle against the offensive of capital and against fascism, and on this basis help to create a large body of working class united front activities».

4. For which reasons the working class can and must exert its hegemony in the policy of Front?

The working class, the industrial proletariat, is the most irreducible antagonist of capital because the general development of capitalism don't threaten its existence (as occurs, on the contrary, for the petty-bourgeois strata), but increases, at world-wide level, the number of workers and makes always more important the economic and social role they have as principal producers of the society's material wealth; therefore, the material interests of the working class coincide with the fundamental development tendency of the productive forces (including the science and its technical applications to the production).

The industrial proletariat - which don't possess any mean of production - is the class directly exploited by capital, that obtain from the surplus labor not paid for of the workers the profit of which lives the whole bourgeois class in all its social ramifications. The working class is then the only social class that has an antagonistic relation with capital in the sphere itself of productive process, and is therefore the most pugnacious class, the only revolutionary class to the end.

The working in the great capitalistic industry educates the workers to the activity conducted in common, to the organisation, the discipline, the spirit of collectivism. All this allows to the

industrial proletariat to increase its class conscience, to assimilate the ideas of socialism, and to get ready for its revolutionary task: the knocking down - at the head of all the oppressed and exploited people - of the political rule of bourgeoisie and the instauration of the dictatorship of proletariat for the passage from capitalism to socialism and communism.

These are the reasons why, in all the historical phases of the revolutionary process, the working class can exert its hegemony on others layers of oppressed and exploited working people, and - under the direction of its party, the Communist Party - can extend its hegemony and exert a leading on a part of the working petty-bourgeoisie too.

5. The recovery of the historical experiences of the Popular Fronts carried out in France and Spain in the Thirties of the last century is highly useful in order to understand that the joint action of the working class organized in its own organisms is fundamental for the mobilization of the masses and the success of the policy of Popular Front.

What was the origin of the Popular Front in France? On February 6th, 1934 the French Right-wing organized a seditious manifestation, proclaiming the necessity of a «strong State» (as in Mussolini's Italy and in Hitler's Germany») against the «flabby and corrupt» parliamentary régime.

In order to oppose the menace of the reactionary and Fascist right-wing, the French Socialist Party SFIO hesitated to appeal to the workers mobilization. while the Communist Party launched an appeal inviting to a great counter-manifestation by the 9th February. The amplitude of the manifestation on February 9th, in the course of which the two grand processions of communist workers and socialist workers rejoined themselves jointly, marked a turning point, followed by the mighty general strike on February 12th.

Although the necessity of building United Front committees of action in the factories was at once felt, the Pact of Unity of action stipulated on July 1934 between the French Communist Party and the SFIO Party, with which the two parties engaged themselves to defend the democratic freedoms and the republican institutions menaced by the fascism, did not provide the formation of Worker Committees and of unitary rank-and-file Committees for the struggle against the fascism. In some occasions the communist didn't give up to ask the settlement of these organisms, but the center-right Direction of the SFIO, whose leaders were Léon Blum and Paul Faure, was always unwilling.

After the Popular Front victory in the elections on April-May 1936 and the formation of the Popular Front government presided by Léon Blum, the French working class was still able to demonstrate its high combativeness.

Everything began in Le Havre, with the struggle of the workers of the factory Bréguet against the dismissal of two syndical delegates who refused to work on the May Day. In support of their delegates, the 600 workers of that factory downed tools and, for the first time in France, a strike was joined by the occupation of the plants. In Toulouse and other places the work's suspension happened again, with occupation of the places of work. The same form of struggle spread all over the France, and on May 28th the 35.000 Renault workers downed tools, swaying in their favor all metalworkers of the Parisian region. In French provinces were involved in the movement not only the workers of the big factories, but also the working women and men of the little factories, to which joined later the dockers and seamen too.

In the course of the occupations the workers stayed on the place day and night, provided by their families and by the populations of nearby towns. In the seized enterprises the power was concentrated in the hands of «strike committees», and a worker-assembly occurred every day inside them.

With the strikes and occupations the workers obtained by the Popular Front government some important improvements of their wages and work conditions, but no revolutionary prospective opened in France after the fall of Léon Blum government.

In the first months of Blum government there was a direct tie between the struggles of the workers in their factories and the laws proposed by the ministers and approved by the Parliament.

At the beginning of the government action this tie between the working class, the popular masses and the action on institutional level was explicitly claimed.

But the government ended by representing more and more the parliamentary groups that supported it, and less and less the social movement that had pushed it to the power.

The involvement of the working class was unquestionable in so many moments of its struggle, but there was not, at the rank-and-file level, an organizational tissue of organisms of proletarian United Front as «motive power» of the Popular Front, according to the clear Dimitrov's indication.

A heavy responsibility for this absence was that of the reformist leaders of the syndical Confederation who were against the United Front.

And this absence was perceived particularly in the moments in which the Council of ministers and the leaders of political parties made some decisions of capital importance without any control by proletarian mass organisms.

So the fundamental limit of the French experience of the Popular Front of the Thirties was the fact that the joint action among the political parties founded its expression in great unitary mass demonstrations in the streets and squares of Paris or other French cities, but not also in the capillary action of rank-and-file committees of proletarian United Front or of anti-fascist Popular Front, as those recommended by the Communist International.

6. In Spain, after the removal of king Alphonse XIII in consequence of the defeat of monarchical parties in the elections for the Constituent Assembly (1931), was proclaimed the Republic and was installed a provisional government with the republican Manuel Azaña as Prime Minister and the socialist Largo Caballero as Minister of Labor. After a year from the proclamation of the Republic, in August 1932 occurred the first attempt (failed) of a military coup d'état with the *pronunciamento* of general Sanjurjo.

The Azaña-Caballero government promoted a weak agrarian reform which not satisfied the hunger for land of the peasants. An always more wide cleavage opened between the government and the rural and urban proletariat. The government fell in 1936, and the new elections gave the victory to the right-wing forces, while the economic crisis reached its highest point, with a constant growth of the number of unemployed.

The Socialist Party began a partial self-criticism, and the Communist Party of Spain, began to practice a rank-and-file policy of unity with all the proletarian forces.

On October 16th, 1934 broke out an insurrection in Asturias. Led by unitary organisms (the *Alianzas Obreras*), in which communist, socialist and anarchical proletarians came together, it extended from the mining hollow as far as the chief town, Oviedo. In some days the region was under the control of the revolutionary forces, directed by a Committee that took upon itself all government functions. The workers columns resisted the government troops converging from Castile and Galicia. But in the end the revolutionary forces were constrained to surrender to the troops commended by the *falangistas* generals Franco, Ochoa, Yagüe and Varela. The repression was very hard: more of 1.000 killed, many of them shot immediately, and 30.000 prisoners, many of which were tortured.

After this atrocious repression, the Communist Party mobilized the more revolutionary elements of the masses in joint actions, creating the concrete conditions for the formation of the anti-fascist Popular Front.

On June 1935 the secretary of the Communist Party, José Díaz, addressed a public appeal to the Socialist Party, to the anarchists, the trade unionists, the republicans and all the anti-Fascists for the formation of an Anti-Fascist Popular Concentration, with the proletariat in hegemonic position. We reproduce some politically salient passages of this call:

«We of the Communist Party are struggling and always will struggle for the realization of our maximum program, for the instauration in Spain of a workers and peasants Government, for the dictatorship of proletariat in our country.»

But in this moment in which a heavy peril is menacing the workers, with the Fascism master of the State's principal resources, we declare that we are ready to struggle with all the anti-Fascist forces, on the basis of a minimum program of obligatory acceptance by all people that will enter in the Anti-Fascist Popular Concentration.

[...] The Anti-Fascist Popular Concentration must be founded on the "Alianzas Obreras y Campesinas", on the organisms of unity and struggle of the proletariat and of the peasants. And it's not necessary that I expatiate on the meaning and importance of the "Alianzas Obreras and Campesinas". This has been evident in October, with the seizure of power by Asturian workers.

This necessity, this our foresight, must be well understood. It's well-known that the unique revolutionary class, consequently revolutionary to the end, is the proletariat. For this reason the proletariat has to be the leading force of the Anti-Fascist Popular Concentration. This is the best warrant that the Popular Concentration will serve the interests of the anti-Fascist masses without drawing back until it will achieve its objective. And its objective is to knocking down the reactionary and Fascist government».

On January 15th, 1936 the Left forces signed an Unity Pact and, a month after, the Popular Front, of which were members the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and the republican parties of the petty and middle bourgeoisie, gained the elections. A new government came into being under the presidency of Azaña, in which socialists and communists had no representative. Some Popular Front Committees were established, but nearly always they were subordinate to the petty-bourgeois legality, and the Communist Party did not succeed in transforming them in organisms of a true popular power.

About the middle bourgeoisie and some sectors of the Army, they refused to attack the interests of capitalism, in order to save their privileges.

The revenge of the reactionary and Fascist traitors supervened in a short time. In July, in Morocco and in Spain broke out a military rebellion, led by the "four generals" (among which predominates Francisco Franco, the scoundrel of Asturia) and began the Spanish civil war, in the course of which - on the fronts of the river Ebro, of the Guadarrama, of the defense of Madrid, and in many other battles - the working class shed heroically its blood together with the International Brigades.

The scarce weight of the proletarian United Front organisms was not the only limit of the Spanish experience - for example, there was the incomprehension of the nature of that war as a revolutionary national war - but the feebleness of those organisms influenced negatively the struggle's development because the only true guarantee of a struggle against a powerful and unmerciful enemy is the compact unity of the working class.

7. The policy of United Front and Popular Front embodies, today as yesterday, the right marxist-leninist tactics that should be conducted with decision and cleverness, taking into account the specific reality of every country. This tactics is indispensable for settling our relations with the masses and increasing our influence on the worker and popular movement, for developing its mobilization and realizing better relations of force, as a precondition of further revolutionary advances.

Today, with the brutal and reactionary offensive of capitalism, with the populist and fascist menace in many countries, with the dangers of imperialist war, the realization of the Popular Front (in its various expressions and denominations), that presupposes alliances with the layers of the petty-bourgeoisie struck and impoverished by the economic crisis, by the measures of austerity, etc., is a fundamental objective; on condition that the working class, with its United Front of struggle, carries out an important role of direction and political influence on all the other layers of the working people.

The proletarian United Front is the joint action of all the sectors of the working class; it's the formation of unitary organisms of struggle (committees, counsels, etc.) in the working places and on the territory; it's the trade-union class unity, the unitary struggle of the organized and non-organized workers, in order to defend the economic and political interests of the proletariat, its

freedoms and rights, against the capitalistic offensive and the bourgeois reaction, against the perils of imperialist war, in strict connection with the final objectives of our struggle.

The construction processes of the United Front and of the Popular Front can go on at the same time. The one helps the other. It's important that the working class supports the claims of the layers and the social sectors attacked by capitalism. As much important is the recognition of the urgent claims of the working class by the popular coalitions.

Clearly, a Popular Front without the working class is an inconceivable thing. At the same time we have to say that the concept of a Popular Front as a simply "alliance" among various classes and social layers (the working class, the petty bourgeoisie of the cities, the poor farmers, etc.) is insufficient. This alliance has always a direction, which may be of a class or of another. As marxist-leninists we have to put into practice the concept of direction, of hegemony, of the proletariat inside this alliance.

When we speak of direction of the working class in the Popular Fronts, we are not referring only to the role of the Communist Party, which is its vanguard detachment. A class direction means to struggle for the realization of Popular Front organisms that are in the hands of elements of proletarian extraction. A true Popular Front must not only include the representatives of the working class with their political and immediate vindications, but must have them at its head, in the fire of the struggle.

The strengthening of the leading role of the working class in the Popular Front politics serves to avoid many errors (for example, to identify the Front with the Party), and helps to develop the organic relation of communists with the best proletarian elements.

One of the reasons why in Italy was not achieved till now a decisive progress towards the formation of a Left coalition of anti-capitalistic, anti-Fascist, democratic and popular forces is the incomprehension and the missing recognition of the leading role of the working class. With the consequent negation of the dialectical relation between the proletarian United Front and the policy of unity between the working class and the other victims of capitalism.

Because of this profound limit, the policy of Front is substantially denied or boycotted by many opportunistic, social-democratic and revisionist forces; or it is conducted as a petty-bourgeois policy, often restricted to occasional moments, or limited to the formation of coalitions or alliances exclusively on the electoral ground. On the other hand, there are some sectarian and ultra-left tendencies that don't understand the hegemony of the working class and consequently reject the policy of Front.

One must to openly fight these deviations, re-launching and developing our work in an objective situation that presents today, in Italy and in the whole world, favorable conditions and political opportunities for the formation of the United Front and of the Popular Front.

It's indispensable that the worker and popular, revolutionary and anti-capitalistic left, the political, syndical and social forces that resist to the capitalistic offensive, can build up some spaces of meeting, debate and common mobilization, can realize steady popular coalitions, struggling against the class enemy and its collaborationists, strengthening the class nature of these coalitions decidedly different from those of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois left, and confirming the prospect of a revolutionary breaking off of the present economic and political system.

The marxist-leninists have always to be at the head of this struggle, without never giving up their independent work of communist agitation, of organisation and mobilization of the popular masses.

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