



# THE COMINTERN AND THE UNITED FRONT

*Darryl Horan*

# The Comintern and the United Front

Darryl Horan

.....

Owing to the relatively weak position the revolutionary left finds itself both internationally and in Ireland, most working people today express their political demands through reformist channels. This is seen through the day-to-day calls for gradual change. Sinn Féin, Labour, the Social Democrats, and the Greens all embody this perspective, which vouches for concessions that tinker around the edge of Irish capitalism without directly challenging the systems that uphold it. They impress on us the hopelessness of organising outside a system that is built against us and emphasise that even if this system is stacked against ordinary people, they can reform it to extract enough to meet the demands of workers today. The record, though, demonstrates the opposite of this, showing their complete inability to meet the most basic of these demands. The legacy of the last two governments in the republic to involve the centre-left, Fianna Fáil—Greens and Fine Gael—Labour with Sinn Féin, and the SDLP likewise in Stormont shows that the gap between the promises of the reformist left and lived reality could not be starker. Promises to reduce inequality, reform the two-tiered healthcare system, and end homelessness have all failed, and the results mean each is now in crisis.

In this space, socialist parties like People Before Profit have arisen partly as a result of movements like the water charges, repeal, and anti-austerity campaigns. They stress the need for people power over the desires of reformist organisations in order for politics to be resolved inside Dáil Éireann, Stormont, or Westminster. Central to the interventions made by People Before Profit in these movements has been the call for “united fronts.”

The united front tactic was developed by German communists but only fully embraced by the endorsement of the Communist International in 1921

and 1922.<sup>1</sup> It follows a series of debates around how communists relate to the working class and emphasises the necessity for communists to win the majority of workers through the line of “to the masses.” People Before Profit, applying the united front tactic, has continually stressed the need to work within wider coalitions to bring about change from below. The success of the tactic lies in the ability of organisers to work with people or groups who agree on a single issue or range of issues while maintaining independence on other issues.

The tactics achievements are most visible in the campaigns around water charges and repeal. Both campaigns stressed the need to bring ordinary people into coalitions to defeat austerity taxes and win abortion rights. Revolutionaries helped to construct coalitions like Right2Water, which offered an alternative for many by dividing the debate over water charges into two sides: those who would implement water charges and those willing to oppose them. Inside these coalitions, then, revolutionaries were able to influence the tactics of the campaign, pressing home the need for non-parliamentary actions.<sup>2</sup> But only by bringing together groups like Sinn Féin, the left-wing unions, and revolutionary parties under a united front were they able to develop space to push a radical strategy.

This push does not come easily, and must be fought for. There are a plethora of historical and recent examples of the reluctance of reformist forces to adopt a revolutionary strategy: For the anti-water charges movement, it was the call for non-payment, and during the eighth amendment referendum the slogan “Free, safe and legal” was decried by some elements for crossing the moderate’s demands. Internationally, this phenomenon can be observed in groups like Stand Up to Racism and the Stop the War Coalition, where reformists and revolutionaries debate over tactics and strategy. What is important to stress is that united fronts will always be sites of struggle, but that should not stop revolutionaries from engaging in them. People are not won over by abstract sloganeering, and united fronts offer revolutionaries the space to win people over in an atmosphere of mobilisation rather than of isolation on the sidelines of the masses. As Trotsky stressed, “Communists cannot oppose such [united front] actions but, on the contrary, must also assume the initiative for them, precisely for the reason

that the greater is the mass drawn into the movement, the higher its self-confidence rises.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Founding of the Comintern and the fight against opportunism**

In tracing the origins of the united front, it is important first to place the tactic in the context in which it evolved. The Communist International was founded following in the sundering of the Second International at the start of the First World War. The necessity of breaking with the pro-war Social Democrats initially left anti-war socialists isolated and often imprisoned or in exile. Despite this, the burdens of the war, food shortages, longer working days with worse conditions, and the mass deaths from the war forced the working classes in Russia and Germany in 1917–18 to rise in revolt, overthrowing their monarchies and ending the war. The immediate consequence was the rise of the Social Democrats in Germany and the Mensheviks and other reformists and populists in Russia to government, but these parties proved a bitter disappointment for workers. They continually chose to uphold the bourgeois institutions over workers’ control, observing a mechanical view of the path of socialism as having first to pass through a bourgeois revolution.

The success of the Bolsheviks in seizing power helped to embolden anti-war socialists worldwide and reinforced the centrality of internationalism for the now rechristened communist movement. This new communist movement was founded in March 1919 as the Communist International or Comintern. The first two years of the Comintern in 1919 and 1920 were characterised by attempts to exclude both “opportunists” and “left-wing communists.” Opportunists were defined by their enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution but their rejection of the application of its politics in their countries, fearful that its importation meant political isolation or civil war. They identified the need for “radical words” but opposed the intensification of revolutionary mass action and the need for a revolutionary movement.<sup>4</sup> Kautsky stands out as a prime example. Following the split between the Independent Social Democrats and Social Democrats in 1915, Kautsky argued for the unification of the two on the basis that the pro-war majority leadership could be convinced of the need to transition to anti-war slogans. Equally, at the same time, Kautsky continually condemned demonstrations

against the war and actions that called for the end of war; he referred to them as “adventurist.”<sup>5</sup> This exposes the contradiction of opportunism: while it at times speaks the language of the left, it cannot commit to the mobilisation of revolutionary workers.

Opportunism or reformism in effect becomes not an alternative path to socialism but wholly opposed to socialism; it elevates the work of parliamentarism over the real power of the working class: their numbers! Lenin, in his attacks on opportunism, defined it as substituting the interest of the whole working class for the immediate interests of sections of workers, in effect dividing workers by economic privileges.<sup>6</sup> What separates opportunists from revolutionaries, then, is the latter’s commitment to people power and the belief that the masses can in themselves liberate themselves.

### **The drift towards ultra-leftism**

Just as Lenin observed the dangers of reformism and opportunism, he also warned against so-called left-wing communism. Lenin scolded left-wing communists for their “doctrinarism which persists in the unconditional repudiation of certain old forms, failing to see that the new content is forcing its way through all and sundry forms.”<sup>7</sup> By this he refers to their opposition to participation in unions and running in elections. A boycott of institutions that still hold credibility among workers can also isolate and undermine the work of principled communists. Both opportunism and left-wing communism for Lenin represented barriers to capturing the support of the masses. He expanded further on this by stating:

Adherents of the Third International in all countries exist for the purpose of *changing*—all along the line, in all spheres of life—the old socialist, trade unionist, syndicalist, and parliamentary type of work into a *new* type of work, the communist. In Russia, too, there was always an abundance of opportunism, purely bourgeois sharp practices and capitalist rigging in the elections. In Western Europe and in America, the Communists must learn to create a new, uncustomary, non-opportunist, and non-careerist parliamentarianism; the Communist parties must issue their slogans; true proletarians, with the help of the unorganised and downtrodden poor, should distribute leaflets, canvass workers’ houses and cottages of the rural proletarians and peasants in



the remote villages (fortunately there are many times fewer remote villages in Europe than in Russia, and in Britain the number is very small); they should go into the public houses, penetrate into unions, societies and chance gatherings of the common people, and speak to the people, not in learned (or very parliamentary) language, they should not at all strive to "get seats" in parliament, but should everywhere try to get people to think, and draw the masses into the struggle.<sup>8</sup>

Lenin rejects the belief that contesting elections follows a path to pure parliamentarism. Rather, he notes the act of distributing leaflets and party literature offers revolutionaries the ability to put abstract slogans into practice through relating to working people, finishing by arguing opportunism must be combated, but equally that the fight against opportunism cannot lead down a path to sectarianism. Ultimately, what Lenin is arguing for is that communists must hold strong to their internationalist principles, lest they repeat the mistakes of German Social Democrats, but that principled communists will only succeed where they win the masses away from reformism and towards revolutionary internationalism. In essence, at all times, communists must be striving to win the masses.

The hard line against opportunism pursued by many in the Comintern, and particularly by such figures as Bela Kun and Mátyás Rákosi, combined with the downturn in the revolutionary wave that had burst out in 1918–19, resulted in catastrophe in 1920 and 1921. There had existed a necessity to divide reformists from revolutionary parties as revolutionary waves spread across Europe. Many of the leaders of the socialist parties that had initially affiliated with the Third International could speak the language of revolution much like Kautsky, but they likewise opposed any shift towards preparing for revolution, and in cases like Italy and France, threatened to split if action was taken in this direction. As capitalism stabilised throughout Europe, these hard lines exacerbated the crisis for revolutionaries and hastened the isolation from the masses that the German and Italian communist parties experienced. The split in the Italian Socialist Party along the lines of the twenty-one conditions for entry to the Comintern and the March Action in Germany both haemorrhaged the strength of

the parties' membership, but most importantly it shattered the influence of communism and pushed it to the margins of the masses. It is in this space, as international communism found itself in a tailspin, that we see the turn towards the politics of the united front.

The turn "towards the masses" attempted to marry the successes of the revolutionary waves of 1917–20 in growing large, mass communist parties throughout Europe with the realisation that a stabilising capitalist order limited the room for communism to manoeuvre. In practice, this meant a kind of realpolitik in the trade unions and municipal parliaments, involving, at times, voting with the Social Democrats. At the same time, the tactic attempted to develop mass mobilisations such as strikes and other campaigns around workers' livelihoods, demonstrating to rank and file Social Democrats or Labourites that their leaders and the trade unions could not fight for their interests, thus winning workers over to a revolutionary programme. This formed the bedrock of how the united front operated in the Comintern. The tactic reemphasised that the success of the Bolsheviks had been their ability firstly to win the masses and with that support then seize power. It also recognised that sectarianism would not win over the masses and that the best way to win working people was through coalitions that mobilised people in an increasingly radical direction.

### **Trotsky's analysis of the united front**

Trotsky stands out as the figure who most adeptly understood the importance of the united front tactic and remained one of its most ardent defenders until his death. In the debates around the tactic during the third and fourth congresses of the Comintern, he outlined the argument for the shift to the united front, its mechanics, and its relevance for revolutionary organisations. In his response to reports on the position of French communism, he said:

The task of the Communist Party is to lead the proletarian revolution. In order to summon the proletariat for the direct conquest of power and to achieve it, the Communist Party must base itself on the overwhelming majority of the working class.<sup>9</sup>

For Trotsky, the success of a communist revolution required that the calls for revolution must be supported by the broad masses. Tendencies like the left-wing communism that had arisen after the First World War saw revolution as originating not from the working

classes but rather with a vanguard organisation that pressed its way to victory. This misunderstood both the Bolshevik position and that of Marxism as a whole. For the Bolsheviks, the vanguard represents the party that is the most consistent defender of the working class; it is not to be the replacement of the masses as the agent of revolution.<sup>10</sup> This idea of a small network of revolutionaries as the core foundation for revolution resembles more closely the ideas of Louis Auguste Blanqui than of Marx.<sup>11</sup>

Following the defeat of the revolutionary wave of 1919–21, it became clear that most workers and broader masses still related to reformism. Where there was a clear majority relating to the reformist social democratic parties, there was a need to break this, and for Trotsky, this was best done through engaging people in mass struggle. It is only by doing this that people can be made to see through the limitations of reformism and push towards revolutionary politics. Trotsky saw the united front as the vehicle for this change. It is working in united fronts with reformists that allows communists to demonstrate the superiority of revolutionary politics over reformism. To put it another way, the limitations of reformism are put on display when parliamentary politics cannot resolve their day-to-day struggles, and the application of the united front offers a path to a revolutionary perspective. Rather than flinging abstract propaganda at the masses, the united front offers communists the ability to educate workers through joint struggle, thus bringing forward revolutionaries from reformists.

Unity in struggle places revolutionaries in their strongest positions. Reformists dread the development of mass movements. We see this in how Labour reacted to the development of the anti-water charges movement: instead of embracing an anti-neoliberal revolt, they chose to combat it. The preferred space for reformists is in parliament, social partnership, and ministerial office. Revolutionaries can utilise calls for unity to stress the unity of struggle, though importantly not unification as a party on unprincipled or reformist grounds. Trotsky stresses that initiating united fronts does not weaken the principled position of communists:

We participate in a united front but do not for a single moment become dissolved in it. We function in the united front as an independent detachment. It

is precisely in the course of struggle that broad masses must learn from experience that we fight better than the others, that we see more clearly than the others, that we are more audacious and resolute.<sup>12</sup>

It is crucial that communists maintain their principled position; it is precisely this that separates the united front from the popular front. The latter dissolves the real power of communists, mobilising masses into a project of defending aspects of the bourgeois state. This is demonstrated by the results of the 1936 election in France, which brought to power the Popular Front. The election signalled the strength of working-class power, and strike waves and occupations spread across France, with over six million on strike at its height, but the response of the socialists was to demand that the PCF (French Communist Party) use its influence to help defuse the strike wave, and the communists agreed to this.<sup>13</sup>

The united front enables communists to develop principled revolutionaries through struggle, not just with propaganda. Trotsky's argument expands on this:

The growth of the mass aspects of the movement tends to radicalize it, and creates much more favourable conditions for the slogans, methods of struggle, and, in general, the leading role of the Communist Party.<sup>14</sup>

In effect, the natural outgrowth of united front work is radicalisation. This can be observed both during the Comintern and today. The outgrowth of the Comintern's anti-fascist campaigns in 1922–23 didn't consolidate reformist positions but rather exposed the state's inability to protect workers and trade unions against fascist violence and led to the development of organic anti-fascist militias throughout Europe.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, more recently, the success of the Anti-Nazi League in the UK lay in the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands demonstrating against and defeating the Nazi National Front.<sup>16</sup>

Unwillingness to engage in united front work carries risks in three main ways. The first is it that breeds passivity, whereas the skills developed through united front work teach communists how to relate to workers in struggle. Without this understanding, an organisation can become passive with regard to

developments in general society and may miss key emerging struggles. This is why it's that crucial revolutionary socialists orientate themselves towards initiating united fronts. The second risk is that of isolation. The best way to win reformist-minded workers into revolutionary politics is through struggle. The united front tactic offers a unique space in which to work with reformist leaders in mobilising people and counter what can be attempts by reformist leaders to isolate and crush revolutionary parties. Lastly there is the danger that isolation can lead to mistaken political positions. In 1920, the Communist Party of Germany initially refused to support calls for a united front against the Kapp Putsch, arguing that it would not lift a finger to support the Social Democrats that had crushed the Spartacist uprising.<sup>17</sup> The backlash from both rank-and-file party members and the general working class was strong enough that the party quickly rescinded its position and supported the general strike against the coup. Worse, in 1933, the refusal by either the SPD or KPD to call for and support a united front led to Hitler's Nazi Party coming to power with little resistance, where once in power they progressively crushed all workers' organisations.

### **Lessons For Today**

The context in which the united front emerged, the development of the working class into two general formations, a socialist/reformist bloc and a communist/revolutionary bloc, has largely come apart and in many cases no longer exists, but there are still important lessons to be learned. Firstly, even without the mass parties of the twentieth century, united fronts can function by bringing out the masses of people who otherwise would not engage in political activity. This is the experience of the marriage equality, repeal, and the anti-water-charges campaigns. It makes united front work all the more important, as the left cannot rely purely on the membership of its parties. These comprise a small fraction of the working population of Ireland, but offer revolutionary parties a strategic opportunity in that the ideological hold reformist parties have over working people is weaker than in the past, and when revolutionary waves develop, revolutionaries can exploit this.

Then there is the need to combat ultra-left sectarianism. The inclination of some on the Irish left who refuse to work with Sinn Féin in united fronts

misses the central objective of the united front, which is to win over reformist workers through struggle. Propaganda work alone, or the mere criticising of Sinn Féin, will not succeed in catapulting the revolutionary left's support above that of Sinn Féin so long as they are seen as a party of change. Both the anti-water-charges movement and repeal showed Sinn Féin's weak ideological base, but this was done best when there were socialist activists in Right2Water and Together for Yes to make the case that Sinn Féin acted opportunistically. The task then is to win the voting base of Sinn Féin to mass action and mobilisation; only then will the revolutionary left be able to supplant Sinn Féin by exposing its opportunistic character and become the primary party of the Irish left.

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Choonara, 'The United Front', *International Socialism*, 117, p68.

<sup>2</sup> <https://socialistparty.ie/2016/08/how-the-protest-movement-boycott-forced-the-suspension-of-water-charges/>

<sup>3</sup> Leon Trotsky, 'On the United Front', *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Volume 2, 1972, p131, available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-2/08.htm>

<sup>4</sup> V.I. Lenin, 'Opportunism and the Collapse of the Second International', 1920, available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/dec/x01.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> John Molyneux, *Marxism and the Party*, 1978, p65.

<sup>7</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Left Wing Communism: An infantile disorder*, 1920, p17.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p92.

<sup>9</sup> Trotsky, 'On the United Front', p127.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*, 2015, p260.

<sup>11</sup> Clara Zetkin, 'Speech in Discussion of the Tactics and Strategy in John Riddel', *To the Masses: Proceeding of the Third Congress of the Communist International*, 2016, pp1079–85.

<sup>12</sup> Trotsky 'On the United Front', p134.

<sup>13</sup> See Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern*, 1985, p146.

<sup>14</sup> Trotsky 'On the United Front', p132.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Fowkes, *Communism in Weimar Germany*, 1983, p189.

<sup>16</sup> John Molyneux, 'Marxism and Fascism', *Irish Marxist Review*, 30, p53.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Levi, 'Our Path – Against Putschism', in Daniel Guaido, 'Paul Levi and the United Front in the Communist International', *Historical Materialism*, Volume 25. No 1, p19.