

The United Front: Then & Now

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Revolutionaries are famous for their divisions. Any new initiative of the left is invariably thrown the classic Monty Python joke of 'Are you the People's Front of Judea or the Judean People's Front'. This captures the lack of seriousness among some ultra-left propaganda groups, but it also trivialises serious differences in strategy, organisation, and tactics among genuine Marxists. As socialists confront capitalism, and the systems that have developed around it, they inevitably encounter challenges that can lead to strategic disagreements.

History shows the numerous competing responses by socialists to the questions of nationalism, racism, and gender-based oppression to name only a few examples. Meanwhile, the question of imperialism paralysed the workers' movement at the start of the twentieth century and caused a rupture among socialists and communists that has never been healed.

Revolutionaries have historically placed great importance on the failure of the Second International to respond appropriately to the question of imperialism. Acquiescence by its principal

elements to militarism and war forced genuine revolutionaries out of the mass parties of the Second International into smaller, more isolated groups. This isolation weakened the connection between revolutionaries and the wider working class. It also produced an existential crisis for revolutionaries in the period after the war.

While reformism had been weakened by its association with the conflict, it had not been defeated. Worker's militancy had shot up, but under the influence of reformist leaders it had not broken through into successful revolutions as it had in Russia. Instead, the revolutionary wave ebbed, leaving revolutionaries in western Europe isolated from the main workers' organisations. The United Front was initiated by revolutionaries as a response to these new circumstances.

The tactic was premised on the insistence that socialist revolution could not come about from a small conspiracy, but rather necessitated the support of the masses of ordinary people. The existence of mass social democratic parties and smaller communist parties meant the task for

revolutionaries now became how to break out of their isolation and win mass support away from reformism and increasingly from Stalinism.

Socialism before the First World War

Sectarianism as a political problem is as old as the emergence of a self-conscious worker's movement. Craft Unions excluding 'unskilled workers' or tight conspiracies designed to keep out state spies, but also more passive supporters, long predate any notion of the Leninist vanguard. From the 1870s onward, however, these tactics declined, as capitalism created the conditions for mass trade unionism and mass political parties.

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Mirroring this development, socialist parties established a Second International in 1889 with the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) at its centre. By all accounts, the SPD of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was an impressive organisation. On the eve of the First World War, it had just over a million members, four million votes were cast for it, and it boasted a network of parallel organisations in unions, social clubs, women's societies, and people's universities.¹ It was noted that one "could be born into a social-democratic household,

join an SPD youth organisation, then enter the social-democratic trade union that organised their workplace.... [and] in old age, know that the union would cover their funeral arrangements."² Among its greatest feats was the construction of a political vehicle that could house various strands of Marxism with a commonality of purpose in the advancement of working class power.

The parties of the Second International were successful in building mass organisations that could become hegemonic in shaping the ideas and actions of their members. Through this hegemony, mass parties and mass unions challenged the power of the ruling class to win victories for workers and the wider socialist movement. SPD ascendancy grew quickly with the repeal of the 'exceptional' or anti-socialist laws in 1890. These repressive laws were designed by Bismarck to crush the budding SPD, but they were ultimately repealed due to the popular support built on illegal activity throughout the 1880's.

These successes brought with them new challenges, however. As the SPD became legalised, the prospect of its co-option into the system became significantly more likely. In the years before the war the union leadership increasingly aligned with the leaders of the SPD to manage workers'

expectations rather than promoting confrontation with the bosses. This tendency was reinforced politically by Eduard Bernstein's conception of socialism coming about through peaceful means and incremental change.

But this strategy disintegrated in 1914 with the Kaiser's drive to war. As propaganda was whipped up by the Fatherland Front, the unions and SPD leadership were unwilling to challenge the resulting jingoism for fear of losing mass support. When Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in June 1914, socialists organised anti-war demonstrations across Europe, but the reaction from the leaders of the Second International, and the SPD in particular, was one of resignation.³ Despite an emergency meeting of the International's Executive on July 29 and 30, all that could be agreed was to send letters of solidarity to individual member organisations.

Decades of pronouncements against imperialist war counted for nothing, as the outbreak of hostility was met with surrender and nationalist acquiescence. When on August 5, a vote was put to the Reichstag on funding for the war, the SPD capitulated, voting through war credits, thus endorsing the war itself.

With the exception of the Serbian and Russian Social Democratic Parties, socialist parties in each of the combatant states lined up, one after the other, to endorse the war and the massacre of the wider working class that resulted from it. The war separated the parties of the Second International into warring blocs which became subservient to their nation's military interests. Several split as the war dragged on, and the death toll climbed intolerably. The SPD's support for the war led it to expel its left flank, and as war fatigue grew, they even supported the jailing of one of their own Deputies, Karl Liebknecht, and Rosa Luxemburg, for their anti-war activism.

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After four years of slaughter the war ended through two revolutions, one in Russia led by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and a second in Germany, led by sailors, soldiers and workers in Kiel, when the Kaiser's admirals attempted to send the navy on a futile last ditch attempt to win glory for the Empire. The catalyst for each, was reflected in the post-revolutionary order in both. In Russia, the Bolsheviks were able to construct a fledgling worker's state under immense attacks from counter-revolutionary forces aided and supported by the imperialist powers.

But they were also plunged into a civil war that gradually decimated the Russian working class and shifted power from worker's soviets to the upper bureaucracy of the newly re-christened Communist Party. In Germany, the revolution brought different strands of the old SPD into power and so was quickly subdued.

The provisional coalition was made up of the most conservative forces of the SPD known as the Majority Socialists (MS) and a more left-wing break-away grouping known as the Independent Socialists (IS) or the USPD. The government collapsed almost immediately in December 1918, when the MS unilaterally suppressed a group of revolutionary sailors, prompting the withdrawal of the IS from office. A month later, when a wider revolt broke out in Berlin, the Majority Socialists used the opportunity to form a compact with reactionary irregulars called the 'Freikorps'. These had been officers and right-wing soldiers during the war, and they now set out to put down the revolution through a reign of terror that would last for months and would involve the massacre of many of the newly founded Communist Party of Germany (KPD).

The road to the United Front

The KPD had been practically decapitated by the spring of 1919. Most of its leading

members, including Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Leo Jogiches and Eugen Leviné had been murdered or exiled. What remained was a shell-shocked organisation, deeply divided over strategy. The main debate centred on the KPD's relationship to forces outside itself. The party survived a split after its second congress when its left flank walked out over ditching its boycott of elections, its abstention from the General German Trade Union Federation (ADGB) and moves to centralise the party. Despite these initial losses, the move away from sectarianism brought the KPD closer to the much larger Independent Socialists (USPD), and in October 1920 its leadership was able to convince the left of the USPD to merge with the KPD, constituting for the first time a mass party of between 350,000 to 500,000.⁴

Around this time, two broad tendencies were developing inside the KPD, one led by Paul Levi, which saw the party's growth as coming through winning an electoral base, increasing its influence among the union movement, and winning reformist workers by working with the SPD on a militant basis.⁵

But sectarianism still plagued the KPD, and a second tendency began to arise around figures like Ruth Fischer, Ernst Thälmann and Arkadi Maslow. This section

consciously placed itself in opposition to Levi. They opposed attempts by the KPD to win SPD aligned supporters through a focus on bread and butter issues, seeing it as a ploy to move the KPD away from its revolutionary roots, and at times going as far as to suspect Levi of wanting to disband the KPD into the SPD.⁶ They misunderstood the context revolutionaries were now operating in. Capitalism was not the weakened force it had been in 1918 and 1919. Communist parties had managed to solidify themselves, but revolutionary consciousness had not permeated through the masses of ordinary people. The mistaken belief that it had would cost revolutionaries dearly.

In Germany, this mistaken confidence came from the dramatic growth in the KPD itself. Because of its huge size, the radicals believed the time for revolution was ripe and when a revolt broke out in Leuna's massive chemical works in March 1921, the radicals saw this as their opportunity. With the support of the Russian dominated Comintern, they were able to force Levi from his position as party chair. They then proceeded to turn the KPD towards insurrection, calling its members out on strike and beginning to arm them.

The call did not progress far beyond the revolutionary left, however. While isolated

workers rose in the industrial heartlands of Saxony, everywhere else they remained passive. The state quickly suppressed the isolated revolts, and the Communists were driven underground. The destruction of the KPD's legal operations was compounded when Clara Zetkin was caught trying to flee Germany with confidential party documents. These revealed that the KPD had had to resort to attacking workers to force them out on strike, that most of its members had not answered the call for insurrection and that the party was in pieces after the failed uprising.⁷

The fallout forced a wider change in direction. The KPD was haemorrhaging members. When their delegation addressed the 3rd Congress of the Comintern in August 1921, it reported just over 180,000 members - a loss of between half and two-thirds of its forces. Communists had also faced setbacks in Italy and France and the leaders of the Comintern, Lenin and Trotsky, now recognised the tide had washed out, at least for the moment, on revolutionary action. In response, they argued for the need to connect communist parties with the daily struggles of working people. If they were going to become revolutionary vehicles, they would need to influence much larger layers than had been the case in 1921.

Trotsky summed up this new thinking in the following remarks “The task of the Communist Party is to lead the proletarian revolution... to achieve it, the Communist Party must base itself on the overwhelming majority of the working class.”⁸ The slogan of the congress was ‘To the Masses’ and the wider strategy became known as the United Front.

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The task was to break the majority of workers from passivity and reformism. It had become clear that communist parties had not united the working class around themselves. Reformist parties still commanded the majority support of workers in most countries. To break this support, revolutionaries needed to call for joint action between socialists and communists in support of the immediate interests of the workers. It meant defending wages against inflation, fighting to improve conditions, and calling for unified action against fascist paramilitaries. Calling for unity around concrete demands could put social democratic parties into a catch 22. If they accepted the need for unified action this would increase the goodwill between communists and socialists and take the movement in a more radical direction. If they refused, SD leaders could be shown up as acting as a barrier to the real interests of ordinary people.

The period between August 1921 and autumn 1923 represented the classic era of united front tactics in Germany. Through its action against attacks on workers' terms and conditions and by mobilising against the threat posed by fascism, the KPD was able to double in size and considerably increase its influence among ordinary workers. The party was able to make inroads that previously did not exist. This sometimes meant acting alongside the SPD, but it often meant acting against their inherent conservatism. When a national railroad strike broke out in February 1922, the SPD used the military to force workers back to work.⁹

The KPD had been the only party to support the strike, and in the process, it had gained a foothold among state employees, a previous bastion of the SPD. United fronts against the fascists also demonstrated the commitment of communist forces to defend workers' interests in the eyes of ordinary people. This was particularly the case when communists blocked fascists from marching through their towns attacking any random worker unlucky enough to be caught in their path. In addition, KPD united front work against the consequences of inflation in the spring and summer of 1923 confirmed to working people that the SPD

would rather compromise with the right than move leftward.

SPD support now haemorrhaged; their connected unions, the ADGB almost halved in membership from 8 million to 4.5 million and members left the SPD itself in droves.¹⁰ United front tactics had rebuilt the KPD, extended its influence, and created networks of support that opened the opportunity for the KPD to directly contest the SPD for the hegemony of German workers. The tactic had proven invaluable in a period of worker's defence, but its undoing came when the mood for revolution actually increased.

During the summer and autumn of 1923, Weimar Germany was in crisis. The state's attempt at reducing its war reparations by printing money caused a hyperinflation that decimated wages and provoked France and Belgium to invade the Rhineland. A nationwide strike broke out in August 1923, which toppled the Cuno government and brought a coalition of Liberal parties and the SPD into office. The KPD used its newfound support to call for the establishment of a worker's government that would exclude the forces of the right. This call was generally popular among industrial workers but only in Saxony and Thuringia did the Social Democratic leaders seriously entertain it. With the SPD

now in government, the united front tactic had to be re-conceived. It was no longer useful to call for joint action with a party that was daily doing the bidding of the ruling classes, but this didn't mean that the fundamentals of the strategy had to be abandoned. Trotsky's insistence on continual orientation to working class struggle continued to apply, but in the context of a general crisis of German capitalism this meant three things simultaneously. It meant breaking the link between the united front and the SPD. It meant increasing the orientation of the KPD towards militant workers – particularly those in the industrial heartlands - and it meant giving a decisive lead when the opportunity for revolution presented itself.

Yet having been burnt by two failed attempts at revolution in 1919 and 1921 – and being internally divided on what to do - the KPD made a number of tactical errors in the decisive months of 1923. One mistake was making abstract calls for revolution while curtailing strike action for fear of state repression. Then, when the revolutionary momentum had actually developed, they hesitated in calling a general strike and failed to lead the workers in an insurrection.¹¹ In 1919, the revolutionary left had been too eager. In 1923, they had not moved decisively

enough, and the longer term results were a degeneration of the KPD under the influence of Stalinism and the destruction of the German working class by fascism a decade later. Louis Saint-Just famously quipped that those who put through half a revolution dig their own graves and having vacillated when the time was ripe, the KPD would eventually succumb to a Nazi reaction linked to the German state. The united front had worked admirably in a period of workers' defence, but the complexity of the situation in 1923 meant that it was never applied successfully. The lesson is not that the tactic itself was defective but that it needs to be applied creatively with only its central principle remaining absolute – the need to continually orientate to the mass of workers in their daily struggles. Decisive proof of this was delivered over the next decade, moreover, as the need for a united front against fascism was recklessly squandered by both the SPD and the KPD. Under the influence of Stalin's disastrous equation of social democracy with social fascism the KPD squandered the possibility of building a united front with the biggest workers' organisation in the state.

For their part, the social democrats contemptuously dismissed the fascists as little more than street thugs and refused to build a united front with forces to their left.

Then when it was too late in Germany, Stalin did a complete 180 degree turn – arguing that communists should unite with every force in a bourgeois democracy outside the fascists. This popular front tactic proved equally disastrous in Spain and France, allowing the far right to take power in one and decisively weakening left organisation in the other. The end result was a total degeneration of the united front tactic that mirrored the degeneration of the workers' movement more generally.

United Front work outside mass parties

The post-war decades were a bleak period for revolutionaries in the west. Despite occasional spikes in strike action, the post-war era ushered in the greatest period of capitalist expansion the west has ever seen. A far cry from the depression predictions issued by orthodox Trotskyism in the immediate aftermath of the war. Mass communist parties were able to consolidate themselves in France and Italy but failed to break through in Germany and Britain.

The prospects for revolutionary socialists remained dim until the explosion of revolt during 1968. Suddenly a new generation of revolutionaries was being forged in struggles on the streets and in the workplaces. In France, students and workers rose up against the de Gaulle

government in historic numbers, with many openly calling for revolution. Italy experienced a Hot Autumn too with strike action and radical occupations all over the country. Britain saw an anti-Vietnam war movement which brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets; while in Derry and Belfast, thousands marched under the banner of the Civil Rights Movement and People's Democracy.

For the revolutionary left, which had been isolated for decades, suddenly the mood for change was present and the prospect of revolution seemed possible. But the same conservative forces that had dominated the 1930's and 1940's were once again best placed to move this revolutionary upsurge into much safer channels. In France, the Communist Party collaborated with the major trade union leaders to encourage workers back into their factories. There were important gains in terms of wages and conditions but the overall mood for radical change was blunted by the combined forces of Stalinism and social democracy. A similar pattern unfolded elsewhere, as radical action exploded on the streets only to be met with conservative forces anxious to channel it into basic reforms. The spirit of 68 was to live long in the memory of the working class but in most places the potential for radical transformation had not been taken.

That said, the best forces – those who were genuinely revolutionary - were capable of growing in their own modest ways, often by using united front tactics. In Britain the International Socialists are a good example of this, growing from around 500 members to more than 3,000 in the seven years from 1967 and 1974.¹² Unlike the Stalinists and the social democrats, the IS confidently argued for rank and file trade unionism, an anti-sectarian approach to revolutionary socialism and principled anti-imperialism, including denouncing the Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Conscious of their relatively small size and their need for organic links to progressive struggles, the IS began to experiment with united front tactics through the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, a Right to Work Campaign and most successfully with the establishment of the Anti-Nazi League (ANL). The backdrop to the launch of the ANL in 1977 was an upsurge in racist and fascist activity partly in reaction to the failures of 68. In the US, the black civil rights movement was being met with murder and intimidation, while in Britain this was a period in which Enoch Powell had threatened 'racial civil war'. With capitalism once again in crisis and unemployment rising, the National Front stood candidates throughout London in

1976, attaining 5% of the vote while also preparing to stand throughout the UK.¹³ Fascists were even marching on British streets intent on terrorising workers, migrants, and socialists into submission. However, two events made it clear that the spread of fascism could be stopped - namely the battles of Wood Green and Lewisham.

Against the arguments of the Labour Party and the Communists, leaders of the IS argued that a united front of anti-fascists could be big enough and militant enough to take on the fascists and win. Victory for anti-fascists in these confrontations resonated with ordinary people and demonstrated to rank and file socialists that fascism was stoppable. These successes paved the way for the establishment of the Anti-Nazi League in November 1977.

Paul Holborow, in his interview with *International Socialism* impresses the importance of physical confrontation, but he also demonstrates that the real success of the ANL was in its ability to create a genuine united front - to bring a whole spectrum of individuals and groups together in mass actions, canvassing, leafleting, organising rock carnivals alongside a harder edge dedicated to physical confrontation. These two aspects

of the movement - mass action and physical confrontation denied the Nazis space to organise.

The Anti-Nazi League had three key achievements that revolutionary socialists can take lessons from today. The first was the construction of a non-sectarian anti-fascist vehicle capable of winning communists, socialists and ordinary people to a project opposing both racism and fascism. In this sense, while revolutionaries were the driving force behind the ANL, they weren't the only force or even the majority. The ANL through its non-sectarianism was able to draw on the energy and experience of rank and file socialists and ordinary people throughout Britain.¹⁴ Holborow shows the breadth of organisations that coordinated inside and around the ANL.

The second lesson is to be creative about how to reach ordinary people. The classic united front can teach you a lot about the dynamics of operating around mass parties, but in the absence of them, revolutionaries need to be creative. Rock against Racism and the subsequent ANL carnivals shows us that anti-racist organising can actually be cool. Revolutionaries need to be able to reach ordinary people, especially young people looking for an outlet. The last achievement was to deny the National Front the ability to preach and practice.

The ANL's mass work included leafleting, canvassing, public meetings, and confrontations, which constrained the ability of the National Front to articulate itself. Their meetings were interrupted, rallies countered, and propaganda efforts derailed. The seismic pressure of the ANL on the National Front shattered the organisation and its support quickly dwindled. The membership split into several rival sections and while they still constituted a danger, they weren't able to regain the position they had in 1976/1977.

Applying the united front in Ireland today

Irish revolutionaries have consistently applied the united front tactic to work with bigger forces for progressive outcomes. When Ronald Reagan visited Ireland in 1984 for example, the Socialist Workers Movement (today's SWN) pulled together the *Reagan Reception Campaign*. Working with the *Irish Campaign against Reagan's Foreign Policy*, which involved over 30 organisations and included prominent figures such as Dr Noel Browne, Joe Duffy and Senator Michael D. Higgins, this united front succeeded in tarnishing what was otherwise meant to be a propaganda tour for Reagan and his war mongering administration.¹⁵

When George Bush and Tony Blair invaded Iraq in 2003, the SWP helped to initiate the *Irish Anti-War Movement* (IAWM), which mobilised tens of thousands in some of the biggest demonstrations the state had ever seen. This united front arose from the combination of three pro-peace groups and parties like the Labour Party, Green Party and SWP who collectively opposed the US invasion of Iraq. This united front mirrored efforts around the world to fight US imperialism through people powered movements. The IAWM's popularity came from its emphasis on reaching ordinary people. It was able to gather a wide array of groups, famous artists, and activists to organise stunts, marches, and concerts. It is this conception of attempting to go out confidently to win ordinary people that played a role in the formation of People Before Profit a few years later.

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The most impactful united front over recent years, meanwhile, was the Right2Water campaign. This campaign brought political parties, like People before Profit and Sinn Féin, together with left trade unions like Unite, Mandate, the CWU and a host of community groups throughout the country in opposition to austerity and the implementation of water charges. Most importantly, Right2Water was able to capture the mood of ordinary people.



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On its first march, it brought out nearly 100,000 people, shattering the passive acceptance of austerity and replacing it with a vehicle for the anger that had consistently been building. As the deadline to register with Irish Water approached, a National Day of Action was held throughout the country on November 1, 2014, with almost a hundred protests attended by well over 200,000 people. The campaign wasn't just mass mobilisations either.

Local community actions formed just as crucial an element, with street meetings and pickets to stop the installation of water meters springing up across the country.¹⁶

The role of revolutionaries was to move these defuse protests and mobilisations into a more broadly political project. It's here that the campaign was able to directly challenge the state through the call for

non-payment of charges. The call was wildly popular with three quarters of people refusing to pay. The key lesson for revolutionaries was that united fronts with a resonating message can break through periods of apathy and passivity and thrust ordinary people into activity.

Revolutionaries should be the foremost fighters for democracy inside these united fronts too. For all of its strengths, a crucial deficiency of Right2Water was its inability to allow ordinary people that were involved in local actions, but not in broader organisations, to articulate themselves within the Right2Water structures.

Over the last few years, the potential for mass working class action has waned but with the growth of the far right now becoming a dangerous reality the united front tactic can once again prove indispensable. After all, most of the underlying factors remain the same; revolutionary politics is still a minority view, reformism remains hegemonic in the working class and yet, workers are still under attack - this time from inflation. But now we also face fascist forces that must be smashed through a combination of direct confrontation and wider action with likeminded forces.

As it always has, fascism represents a danger for socialists, migrants, and the wider working class. To combat it, we need solidarity and working class struggles – the kind that give our class confidence and help to strengthen the left in the process. Sectarianism is always a political dead end. It isolates revolutionaries from their key task which is to win the masses of ordinary people to a revolutionary worldview.

But what must we do to actually build the equivalent of the ANL in Ireland in the 21st century? The specifics will vary in every locality but everywhere socialists should combine three broad tactics. Firstly, they must organise the most determined anti-fascists to stop the right from taking the streets. This will involve building up a network of activists who understand the need to take on the right directly. Secondly, socialists should advocate a looser group of people to create ‘For All groups’ in the areas and include in this prominent personalities, sports people, musicians etc. who have the ear of the local community. The message here should be one of hope not hate, solidarity not scapegoating.

Cultural events that emphasise unity and solidarity are also essential. This is why Rock Against Racism was so successful, and why, in February 2023, *Ireland for All* was

able to gather 50,000 people in Dublin on an anti-racist message. Using figures like Christy Moore, Bernadette McAliskey and Dermot Kennedy and appealing to Ireland’s anti-colonial history can resonate with people, as can slogans like ‘No Blacks, No Dogs and No Irish’ which can form a link with people in the absence of a mass revolutionary party.

Ireland for All also showed that while the unions are for the most part dormant, they can still mobilise - the public service union, Fórsa, had the largest contingent on the march. Thirdly, the left should continue to build relations with working people by connecting with the issues that matter to them most. This will obviously mean attacking the government for their role in the current cost of living crisis, and it will mean attempting to relate to people as they struggle with the housing crisis and the various other attacks on their lives.

Finally, it is worth stating that, as important as it is, the united front should not be seen as a substitute for building a revolutionary party. Instead, it should be seen as an extremely important tactic that revolutionaries employ to win people from a reformist world view in order to organise them in a party dedicated to the revolutionary overthrow of the system itself.

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- ⁴ Pierre Broué, Ian H. Birchall and Brian Pearce. 2005. *The German Revolution 1917-1923*. Leiden, Brill. p.445.
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- ⁸ Duncan Hallas 1985. *The Comintern*. London. Bookmarks. p.67.
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- ¹¹ Chris Harman. 1982. *The Lost Revolution. Germany 1918 to 1923*. Bookmarks, 1982, p.288.
- ¹² Ian Birchall 2008. Seizing the Time: Tony Cliff and 1968. *International Socialism* 118, Spring 2008.
- ¹³ Paul Holborow 2019. The Anti-Nazi League, and its lessons for today. *International Socialism* 163, Summer 2019.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Many Protesting Regan's Visit 1984. @ <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1984/06/02/Many-protesting-Reagan-visit/1726454996800/>; Protest March against Regan's Foreign Policies 1984 @ <https://www.rte.ie/archives/2014/0526/619661-protest-march-against-president-reagans-foreign-policies>.
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