

# For Committees of Action? Not the People's Front

November 26, 1935

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14 October 2010

*In this article, written from exile in Norway in 1935, Leon Trotsky exposed the politics of the "People's Front" in France, a coalition comprising the bourgeois Radical Party, the Socialist Party and the Stalinist Communist Party. Formed after the 1934 fascist riot that brought the right-wing government of Gaston Doumergue to power, the People's Front tied the working class to the bourgeoisie in the struggle against fascism. Once in power, it organized the sellout of the May-June 1936 general strike.*

*Trotsky called for a break with these bankrupt parties and the formation of committees of action as organizations of working class struggle that could grow into revolutionary organs of power.*

*As workers enter into struggle against social austerity in Europe and around the world, they face the need to break the grip of the trade unions and parties that work to suppress working class resistance. In this context, Trotsky's analysis of the situation in France in the 1930s and his call for independent committees of action to mobilize the working class against the bourgeoisie provide an invaluable guide to the political issues working people face today.*

"The People's Front" represents the coalition of the proletariat with the imperialist bourgeoisie, in the shape of the Radical Party and smaller tripe of the same sort. The coalition extends both to the parliamentary and the extra-parliamentary spheres. In both spheres the Radical Party, preserving for itself complete freedom of action, savagely imposes restrictions upon the freedom of action of the proletariat.

The Radical Party itself is undergoing decay. Each new election gives added proof of the passage of supporters away from it to the right and to the left. On the other hand, the Socialist and Communist parties, because of the absence of a genuinely revolutionary party, are growing stronger. The general trend of the toiling masses, including the petty bourgeoisie, is quite clearly to the left. The orientation of the leaders of the workers' parties is no less self-evident: *to the right*. At the time when the masses by their votes and their struggle seek to cast off the party of the Radicals, the leaders of the United Front, on the contrary, seek to save it. After obtaining the confidence of the masses of workers on the basis of a "socialist" program, the leaders of the workers' parties then proceeded to concede voluntarily a lion's share of this confidence to the Radicals, in whom the masses of workers have absolutely no confidence.

The "People's Front" in its present guise shamelessly tramples not only upon workers' democracy but also upon formal, i.e., bourgeois democracy. The majority of the Radical voters do not participate in the struggle of the toilers and consequently in the People's Front. Yet the Radical Party occupies in this front not only an equal but a privileged position; the workers parties are compelled to restrict their activity to the program of the Radical Party. This idea is most outspokenly advanced by the cynics of *l'Humanité*.

The latest elections in the Senate have illuminated with special clarity the *privileged* position of the Radicals in the People's Front. The leaders of the Communist Party boasted openly of the fact that they renounced in favour of non-proletarian parties several mandates which justly belonged to the workers. This merely means that the united front reestablished in part the property qualification in favor of the bourgeoisie.

The "front," as it was conceived, is an organization for direct and immediate struggle. When struggle is in question, every worker is worth ten bourgeois, even those adhering to the People's Front. From the standpoint of the revolutionary fighting strength of the front, the electoral privileges should have been given not to Radical bourgeois but to workers. But in essence, privileges are uncalled for here. Is the People's Front intended for the defense of "democracy"? Then let it begin by applying it to its own ranks. This means: *the leadership of the People's Front must be the direct and immediate reflection of the will of the struggling masses.*

How? Very simply: through elections. The proletariat does not deny anyone the right to struggle side by side with it against fascism, the Bonapartist regime of Laval, the war plot of the imperialists, and all other forms of oppression and violence. The sole demand that class-conscious workers put to their actual or potential allies is that they struggle *in action*. Every group of the population really participating in the struggle at a given stage and ready to submit to common discipline must have the equal right to exert influence on the leadership of the People's Front.

Each two hundred, five hundred or thousand citizens adhering to the People's Front in a given city, district, factory, barrack and village should in time of fighting actions elect their representative to the local committee of action. All the participants in the struggle are bound by its discipline.

The last congress of the Communist International, in its resolution on the Dimitrov report, expressed itself in favor of elected committees of action as the mass support for the People's Front. This is perhaps the only progressive idea in the entire resolution. But precisely for this reason the Stalinists do nothing to realize it. They dare not do anything for fear of breaking off collaboration with the bourgeoisie.

To be sure, in the elections of committees not only workers will be able to participate but also civil service employees, functionaries, war veterans, artisans, small merchants and small peasants. Thus the committees of action are in closest harmony with the tasks of the struggle of the proletariat for influence over the petty bourgeoisie. But they complicate to the extreme the collaboration between the workers' bureaucracy and the bourgeoisie. In the meantime the People's Front in its present form is nothing else than the organization of class collaboration between the political exploiters of the proletariat (the reformists and the Stalinists) and the political exploiters of the petty bourgeoisie (the Radicals). Real mass elections of the committees of action would

automatically eject the bourgeois middlemen (the Radicals) from the ranks of the People's Front and thus smash to smithereens the criminal policy dictated by Moscow.

However, it would be a mistake to think that it is possible at a set day and hour to call the proletarian and petty-bourgeois masses to elect committees of action on the basis of a given statute. Such an approach would be purely bureaucratic and consequently barren. The workers will be able to elect a committee of action only in those cases in which they themselves participate in some sort of *action* and feel the need for revolutionary leadership. In question here is not the *formal democratic* representation of *all* and *any* masses but the *revolutionary* representation of the *struggling* masses. The committee of action is an apparatus of struggle. There is no sense in guessing beforehand precisely what strata of the toilers will be attracted to the creation of committees of action: the lines of demarcation in the struggling masses will be established during the struggle itself.

The greatest danger in France lies in that the revolutionary energy of the masses will be dissipated in spurts, in isolated explosions like Toulon, Brest, and Limoges, and give way to apathy. Only conscious traitors or hopeless muddleheads are capable of thinking that in the present situation it is possible to keep the masses immobilized up to the moment when they will be blessed from above by the government of the People's Front. Strikes, protests, street clashes, direct uprisings are absolutely inevitable in the present situation. The task of the proletarian party consists not in checking and paralyzing these movements but in unifying them and investing them with the greatest possible force.

The reformists and Stalinists fear above all to frighten the Radicals. The apparatus of the united front quite consciously plays the role of disorganizer in relation to sporadic movements of the masses. The "leftists" of the Marceau Pivert type serve to shield this apparatus from the indignation of the masses. The situation can be saved only by aiding the struggling masses to create a new apparatus, in the process of the struggle itself, which meets the requirements of the moment. The committees of action are intended for this very purpose. During the struggle in Toulon and Brest the workers would have created without any hesitation a local fighting organization, had they been called upon to do so. On the very next day after the bloody assault in Limoges, the workers and a considerable section of the petty bourgeoisie would have indubitably revealed their readiness to create an elected committee to investigate the bloody events and to prevent them in the future. During the movement in the barracks in the summer of this year against *rabiot* [the extension of the term of military service], the soldiers without much ado would have elected battalion, regimental, and garrison committees of action had such a course been suggested to them. Similar situations arise and will continue to arise at every step—in most cases on a local but often also on a national scale. The task is to avoid missing a single situation of this kind. The first condition for this is a clear understanding of the import of the committee of action as *the only means of breaking the antirevolutionary opposition of the party and trade union apparatuses*.

Does this mean to say that the committees of action are substitutes for party and trade union organizations? It would be stupid to pose the question in this manner. The masses enter into the struggle with all their ideas, traditions, groupings and organizations. The parties continue to exist and to struggle. During elections to the committees of action each party will naturally seek to elect its own adherents. The committees of action will arrive at decisions through a majority (given complete freedom of party and factional groupings). In relation to parties, the committees of action may be called a *revolutionary parliament*: the parties are not excluded—on the contrary they are necessarily presupposed—at the same time they are tested in action, and the masses learn to free themselves from the influence of rotten parties.

Does this mean, then, that the committees of action are simply—*soviets*

? Under certain conditions the committees of action can transform themselves into soviets. However, it would be incorrect to call the committees of action by this name. Today, in 1935, the popular masses have become accustomed to associate with the word soviets the conception of power already conquered; but France today is still considerably removed from this. The Russian soviets during their initial stages were not at all what they later became, and in those days they were often called by the modest name of workers' or strike committees. Committees of action at their present stage have as their task to unite the toiling masses of France in a defensive struggle and thus imbue these masses with the consciousness of their own power for the coming offensive. Whether matters will reach the point of genuine soviets depends on whether the present critical situation in France will unfold to the ultimate revolutionary conclusions. This of course depends not only upon the will of the revolutionary vanguard but also upon a number of objective conditions; in any case, the mass movement that has today run up against the barrier of the People's Front will be unable to move forward without the committees of action.

Such tasks as the creation of *workers' militia*, the *arming of the workers*, the preparation of a *general strike*, will remain on paper if the struggling masses themselves through their authoritative organs do not occupy themselves with these tasks. Only committees of action born in the struggle can assure a real militia numbering fighters not by the thousands but the tens of thousands. Only committees of action embracing the most important centers of the country will be able to choose the moment for transition to more decisive methods of struggle, the leadership of which will be rightly theirs.

From the propositions sketched above flow a number of conclusions for the political activity of the proletarian revolutionists in France. The cardinal conclusion touches upon the so-called Gauche Révolutionnaire [Revolutionary Left]. This grouping is characterized by a complete lack of understanding of the laws that govern the movement of the revolutionary masses. No matter how much the centrists babble about the "masses," they always orient themselves to the reformist apparatus. Repeating this or that revolutionary slogan, Marceau Pivert subordinates it to the abstract principle of "organizational unity," which in action turns out to be unity with the patriots against the revolutionists. At the very moment when it is a life-and-death question for the masses to *smash* the opposition of the united social-patriotic apparatuses, the left centrists consider the "unity" of these apparatuses as an absolute "good" which stands above the interests of the revolutionary struggle.

Committees of action will be built only by those who thoroughly understand the necessity of *freeing the masses from the treacherous leadership of the social patriots*. Yet Pivert clutches at Zyromsky, who clutches at Blum, who in turn, together with Thorez, clutches at Herriot, who clutches at Laval. Pivert enters into the system of the People's Front (not for nothing did he vote for the shameful resolution of Blum at the last National Council meeting!) and the People's Front enters as a wing into the Bonapartist regime of Laval. The downfall of the Bonapartist regime is inevitable. Should the leadership of the People's Front (Herriot-Blum-Cachin-Thorez-Zyromsky-Pivert) succeed in remaining on its feet in the course of the entire approaching and decisive period, then the Bonapartist regime will inevitably give way to fascism. The condition for the victory of the proletariat is the *liquidation of the present leadership*. The slogan of "unity" becomes under these conditions not only a stupidity but a crime. *No unity with the agents of French imperialism and of the League of Nations*. To their perfidious leadership it is necessary to counterpose revolutionary committees of action. It is possible to build these committees only by mercilessly exposing the antirevolutionary policies of the so-called Gauche Révolutionnaire, with Marceau Pivert at the head. There is of course no room in our ranks for illusions and doubts on this score.

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