

The Popular Front, A Social and Political Tragedy: The Case of France (1936)

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Decades since the spring of 1934 when the Communists first proposed the Popular Front as their strategy for fighting fascism and even longer since the summer of 1939 when it was suddenly terminated by the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the Popular Front—the alliance of the Communists with Socialists, liberals, and even sometimes conservative political parties—remains an issue for the left. [1] For though it arose out of the very specific conditions of the great crises of capitalism of and of Soviet Communism in that era, the Popular Front recurred to become the dominant method of Communist politics in capitalist countries. With Nazi Germany's attack on the Soviet Union, the Communists returned to the Popular Front in 1941, and continued it throughout the war and into the postwar period. The Popular Front thus became not simply a strategy, but almost a political habit, a style, the very way of being of a Communist. Throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century, many people could hardly tell a Communist from a left liberal, for liberalism had become the costume of Communism—which is not to say that Communists became liberals.

In Western Europe by the 1980s the Popular Front evolved into Euro-Communism, and eventually after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, many of the Western European Communist Parties became ordinary social democratic parties. Like the Social Democrats, these post-Soviet Communist Parties, most with new names, not only shared in legislating and governing in capitalist states, but also shared responsibility for neoliberal free market policies, for social welfare budget cuts, and for the rollback of union contracts and the decline of workers' wages. Still today some old-style Communist Parties, Maoist groups, and neo-Stalinists adopt a Popular Front outlook which shapes their day-to-day work in the labor and social movements. Most recently in the United States such groups have argued that support for Barack Obama and the Democratic Party represented in some way a progressive development and a step forward in the struggle for socialism. Such a political position is, of course, a legacy of the Popular Front. [2]

Perhaps the most important reason for discussing the Popular Front, however, is that it represents

in the popular consciousness—including all too often in the radical consciousness—the heyday of Communism, the glory days of “the way we were” in the 1930s, a time supposedly when leftists united with liberals and the ordinary folk to organize labor unions, fight racism, and defeat fascism. While there is some truth in the blurry romantic impressionism of this popular understanding of the period, it tends to obscure more than it illuminates. For the Popular Front, in fact, failed to defeat fascism, while the workers it had organized into unions were soon mobilized under their national flags to fight and die by the millions in a second great war to divide the planet between imperial powers, while at the same time in the Soviet Union the hope of socialism congealed into Communist totalitarianism. The Popular Front thus represented a tragic defeat for the working class, not a victory. Yet the myth remains, and for that reason, it is important to reexamine this storied moment in the past as we organize to meet the challenges of the present and to move forward into the future. For, contrary to what the legend might suggest, the Popular Front, that is, the left-liberal alliance justified in terms of the ultimate victory of socialism, does not represent the way forward.

An Overview of the Period

During the early 1920s the Communist International, then still led by Vladimir Lenin, promoted throughout Europe, where revolutionary possibilities still seemed greatest, the strategy of the united front among workers, labor unions, and working class organizations, anarchist, Socialist, and Communist, in order to build the forces for revolution. The united front was a strategy to both build workers’ power and, through joint action and frank criticism of the party’s allies, to win workers from reformist leadership to revolutionary leadership under the Communist Party.

With Lenin’s death in 1924 and the rise to power of Stalin by 1927, the Communist International was put through a series of dramatic and wrenching shifts. The shifts in the Communist Party strategy between 1927 and Stalin’s death in 1953 form the context for understanding the place of the Popular Front in Communist thinking.

- First, in the Third Period from 1928-1934, the Communists gave up the united front and began to characterize the labor and socialist parties as “social fascists.” The Communists, arguing that the Socialists were as great an enemy as Hitler, not only refused to cooperate with the Socialists but also fought them politically and sometimes physically. In Germany, this Communist strategy succeeded in dividing the Communist and Socialist labor movements and opened the door to Hitler, to the holocaust, and to World War II.

- Second, suddenly reversing their position, in the Popular Front period from 1934 to 1939 the Communists created a political alliance not only with labor unions and Socialists, but also with petty bourgeois and bourgeois political parties—and eventually with any anti-fascist party. The result was the subordination of the left and the labor movement to capitalist parties everywhere, leading to working class defeats in France and Spain where fascism took power and to reform movements which were quickly institutionalized in countries like Mexico and the United States.

- Third, in August of 1939, the Soviet Union shocked the world by entering into an alliance with Hitler’s Nazi Germany, with the two great powers dividing Poland between them. The Communist International simultaneously terminated the Popular Front, subordinating Communist politics to the Communist-Nazi alliance. Everywhere the Communist Party declined in membership while much of the left became disoriented by the sudden shift.

- Fourth, after being attacked by Germany in 1941, the Soviet Union just as suddenly returned to its Popular Front policies—only now often in the form of governments of national unity to win the war. The Communists suppressed their criticism of great power imperialism, subordinated the struggles

of ethnic and racial minorities to the effort to win the war, and joined in no-strike pledges that sacrificed the wages and conditions of labor for the duration. The war also provided the context for the institutionalization of the industrial labor unions and the conversion of their once militant leaderships into bureaucratic business unions.

- After World War II, the Communist continued the Popular Front, only now using it a democratic façade for the Soviet Union's conquest of the nations of Eastern Europe. At the same time in France and Italy, as part of the postwar settlement, the Communists worked with the capitalist parties in Liberation governments to contain and to dampen revolutionary movements in those countries.

- Meanwhile in Russia, Stalin's counter-revolution of 1927-1937 not only eliminated the Old Bolshevik revolutionaries in the notorious show trials, it also took the lives of millions of peasants in the collectivization of agriculture, and through its forced march to industrialization oppressed and exploited millions of workers. The Soviet victory over the Nazis in World War II consolidated Stalin's personal dictatorship and, more important, it institutionalized the bureaucratic Communist or bureaucratic collectivist totalitarian system of the Soviet Union.

- Consequently, the postwar decolonization movement, rather than finding leadership in a democratic, revolutionary and international socialism, was guided by Stalin and the Soviet Union. In the former colonial nations—China, Vietnam, Korea—Stalinist-style Communist Parties led successful national revolutions that rid themselves of Western imperialists, but then created new one-party Communist states. Moreover, Stalinist-style government, forced-march modernization, and command economies became the dominant model for third world countries throughout Africa and Asia, with disastrous results nearly everywhere.

At the center of this world historic tragedy was the destruction of the European working class and socialist movement, which had been born in the revolutionary upheavals of the mid-19th century and which had grown to maturity in the first third of the 20th century, only to be obliterated in the 1930s and 1940s by Stalin's murder of the Russian Bolshevik revolutionaries, by Mussolini's, Hitler's, and Franco's destruction of the Communist and Socialist Parties and anarchist organizations in Italy, Germany, and France. Finally, of course, the European Jewish holocaust and the slaughter of World War II took the lives of millions of people, many of whom had been class conscious workers who had formed the great body of the labor movement. The Stalinist Communist Party of the 1930s succeeded in destroying the European revolutionary labor movement and with it the hopes for socialism for generations.

Surprisingly for those out of the Communist party tradition, the Communists' role in the period apparently poses no problems. As a prominent Canadian Communist leader told me in a recent debate, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating," and he went on to explain that the Popular Front proved to be successful, resulting in the defeat of Fascism and Nazism, in the expansion of the Soviet system to Eastern Europe, and in the post-war anti-colonial movements. [3] The folksy pudding metaphor used to describe the agony of the era suggests that Stalin was a hero after all, that Soviet Communism was a success, and that a bright future lies in that dark past. This is the outlook of Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss, that "things are for the best in the best of all possible worlds" and Hegel's view that "whatever is, is right." What happened, we are told, had to happen and was for the best, even when we know that millions died unnecessarily in the process, when other alternatives existed which might have changed history, and when the results produced the monstrous Fascist, Nazi, and Stalinist states, while leaving capitalism to continue to produce new horrors. We challenge this conservative, uncritical, and ultimately unconvincing and cynical view of such a complex period by looking here at the Popular Front and the role of Communists in the Front period (1934-1939) in France. [4]

The Crisis of the 1930s in Europe

The world crisis of capitalism which had begun with World War I was followed by the economic crisis of the early 1920s, and then by the Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression of the 1930s. This prolonged and painful crisis brought much of Europe to a boiling point three times, once in the late 1910s, again in the mid-1920s, and finally a third time in the mid- to late-1930s. Revolutions in Russia, Germany, Austro-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire overthrew monarchs and brought republican government (of varying degrees of democracy) to the latter three, while they brought socialist revolution to Russia. The wars and revolutions that had shattered the old Europe and the postwar economic crises kept the pot boiling. For two decades, from 1914 to 1934, Europe was ripe for socialist revolution.

The mid- to late-1930s in Europe was a period of enormous popular struggle and resistance from Austria to Spain, accompanied at different times and in various places by peasants' strikes and land seizures, workers' strikes and factory occupations, armed resistance of the laboring classes, and even attempts at revolutionary seizures of power on a regional or local level. Europe—except for Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany—was a cauldron that roiled and seethed and threatened at times to boil over and blow the lid off capitalism.

The recurring crises of the 1910s to 1930s produced more than one generation of socialist and anarchist revolutionaries. Many had been inspired by the Russia Revolution of October 1917. Despite the Stalinist counter-revolution in the Soviet Union and the rise of Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany, revolution still remained a possibility as demonstrated most clearly in Spain. Certainly in the 1920s and into the 1930s many Socialist, Communists, and anarchists believed that the way to stop fascism and to prevent the rise of new fascist political movements was through workers' revolution. This strategic vision would be ended with the coming of the Popular Front, as Communists argued that only by preserving and strengthening capitalist states allied with the Soviet Union could fascism be stopped.

Why the Popular Front?

What events led to the rise of the Popular Front? What had changed to lead the Communists to adopt this new strategy? The Popular Front, was a result of both striving in the workers' movement and of Communist policy which was ultimately determined by the Soviet Union's foreign policy as directed by Joseph Stalin. How did these two forces then—the needs of the workers' movement and Soviet foreign policy—shape the Popular Front?

First, the Communist Party's Third Period theory of "social fascism," which it carried out from 1928 to 1935, had proven disastrous. By not only refusing to ally with the Social Democrats, but actually frequently battling them, occasionally in alliance with the Nazis, the Communists had opened the door to Hitler. Second, the Nazis' surprisingly rapid conquest of political power immediately raised the possibility of a German war against the Soviet Union, forcing Stalin to seek new allies to protect his nascent bureaucratic state. In particular, he now wanted an alliance with France and England. Third, in France, as in other countries where fascism had not yet come to power, ultra-right and fascist groups began to become bolder and to take to the streets. The working people of other nations were horrified with the prospect of fascists coming to power in their own countries as they had in Italy and Germany.

The European working classes, reading the handwriting on the wall, began from below to move, demanding unity on the left and a struggle against fascism both in their own countries and

internationally. The working class desire for unity in the early 1930s initially conflicted with the Communist Party's opposition to an alliance with the Socialists and with the Socialist and Catholic labor unions. Working people in many European countries, however, now desperately wanted an alliance between Communist and Socialist Parties to stop Hitler. They wanted something like a return to the Communist Party's policy of a United Front, that is, an alliance of the left and the labor movement. Stalin would turn these movements from below in another direction.

While workers sought unity to fight fascism, Stalin had his own reasons for the Popular Front, and they were complex. He may be said to have adopted the Popular Front as the strategy for the Communist International for three reasons.

- First, the Popular Front was developed to defend the Soviet Union and its new bureaucratic ruling class. Stalin saw the Soviet Union, still threatened from within by the remnants of the revolutionary Communist left and also by peasant resistance to the forced collectivization of agriculture, now threatened from without by Hitler's Nazi Germany.
- Second, Stalin had an interest in assuring that the Communist International, as an instrument of Soviet foreign policy, would continue to be a major force (in some countries the dominant force) in the labor movement. Stalin's International, therefore, had to take the initiatives to prevent the rise of competitors, particularly competitors on the left.
- Third, Stalin recognized that, should the labor movement escape the control of the Communist Party, socialist revolution in Europe would also potentially threaten the Communist Party's rule and his dictatorship in Russia. Therefore, the Communist International, in order to maintain its hold on the working classes of Europe, put forward the Popular Front as a part of what it claimed was a broader revolutionary strategy to achieve socialism.

For Stalin, the foreign policy issues were overriding. Faced with Hitler and Nazi Germany, Stalin wanted "collective security," that is, an international alliance of the Soviet Union with Great Britain and France. [5] He recognized, however, that he could not reach a collective security agreement as long as the Soviet Union, the Communist International, and the national Communist parties were perceived as a revolutionary threat to capitalism. It was this that led him to seek to transform the old policy of the United Front—that is, an alliance between working class parties—into the Popular Front—that is, an alliance of the working class parties with radical (petty bourgeois) and capitalist parties opposed to Fascism-Nazism in Europe.

Though France and Soviet Russia had already reached a non-aggression pact in 1932, Stalin was keen on turning that agreement into a mutual defense treaty. But such an international treaty could be negotiated only if there were liberal or social democratic governments in France and the other remaining European democracies; consequently it was necessary to create a Communist alliance with both Socialist and liberal capitalist parties in the Western European countries. To achieve an alliance with such capitalist parties within the context of bourgeois electoral politics, however, it was necessary for the Communist International and its affiliated parties to give up calls for revolution, and, beyond that, to become (in this specific context) the defenders of private property and of the state, especially when challenged by revolutionary socialists on the left. [6] We turn now to see how the Popular Front alliance of Socialist and Communist parties with capitalist parties affected the left and the labor movement in the case of France.

The Popular Front in France

France was in the 1930s a major capitalist power and the center of a vast empire that stretched from

the Middle East and Africa to Southeast Asia and to the Caribbean. While some 40 million French enjoyed political democracy at home, authoritarian colonial governments ruled tens of millions abroad. Within France itself conservative and liberal capitalist parties were sometime challenged and sometimes supported by various socialist currents. The Great Depression and the crisis of the thirties created new pressures on French capitalism and its democracy leading to dramatic fluctuations and sudden shifts in politics.

During the period of post-war crisis, France was governed during the 1920s and 1930s by various governments from the left and from the right, with the “coalition of the left,” that is the alliance of the Radicals and the Socialist Party, elected in 1924 and again in 1932. The Radicals were a party of the *petit bourgeoisie*, that is, of small business, whose politics ranged widely from left to right. The rightwing Radical Édouard Daladier led the government in 1933 and 1934, and as the economic crisis deepened, the far right grew and became more audacious. The fascist riots of 1934 provoked the political crisis in France that precipitated the creation of the Popular Front.

The French Communist Party represented a small yet significant force in France in the early 1930s with the social make-up, as well as the reputation and the image which allowed it to play a leading role. While not nearly as large as the Socialist Party, the Communist Party had since its founding in 1920 been the organization that attracted revolutionaries coming out of the anarchist, anarcho-syndicalist, and various socialist traditions. In 1922 the Communist Party had 79,000 members compared to the Socialist Party’s 178,000, but in 1928, though its membership figures had fallen, it had won 11 percent of the vote, 1,064,000 to the Socialists’ 1,698,000. [7] The ultra-left sectarianism of the Third Period of 1928 to 1934 reduced the party’s influence in the working class and society, and its membership declined to about 40,000 by 1930. [8] The Communists remained nevertheless, the revolutionary working class party of France. Many workers still saw the Soviet Union as a workers’ state and the Communists as the revolutionary workers party. Worker militants looked to the Communists to take the initiative.

The conditions called for action. With the onset of the Great Depression and particularly with the coming to power of Hitler in Germany in 1933, rank-and-file Communists, Socialists, and many others in French society wished to build the working class and popular unity necessary to confront both Hitler, as well as the danger of the rise of fascism in France, which seemed a real and immediate danger after the 1934 rightwing riots. Consequently, Stalin’s Popular Front would exert a powerful influence on the labor movement, society, culture, and politics.

The Popular Front’s initial attraction then was the idea of unity, of a workers’ front and a broader peoples’ front against fascism. The Popular Front, at first as a kind of labor and left coalition, proved capable of attracting not only workers and peasants, and their unions and leagues, but also the lower middle classes. Such a united front of labor organizations was not, however, what Stalin and the Communists envisioned. They sought an alliance not only with labor parties and among workers, but also with the parties of the French capitalist class.

Unity in the 1934 General Strike and Demonstration

Even before the Popular Front found its full political expression, the Socialist Party, the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), the Communists and their much smaller United General Confederation of Labor (CGTU), as well as the Radical Party’s middleclass followers, came together in action in the streets. After rightwing riots in Paris on February 6, 1934, the Socialist Party and the CGT called for a general strike and street demonstrations, and while the Communists did not formally join the coalition that issued the call, they did mobilize their members and supporters.

The February 12 general strike—the first successful general strike in French history—was almost everywhere a complete triumph as were the protest demonstrations that accompanied it. [9] In Paris where the largest march and rally took place, some in the SP and the CGT feared the Communists might not join the protest, or might even organize a counter-demonstration or an attack on the Socialists and trade unionists as had happened in the past, but, like the strike, the Paris demonstration of 1934 was a triumph of unity. [10] The great strikes and demonstrations of February 1934 laid the basis among the workers for the political alliance among the unions and the parties.

Unity at all levels became the watchword. The CGT and the Communist CGT-U negotiated the reunification of the labor movement in 1935. After much negotiation, the Socialists, Communists, CGT, and the Radical Party and organizations of the petty bourgeoisie also joined together on July 14, 1935 in a political alliance, the Popular Front, based on a social democratic “minimal” program. During the negotiations, the Communist Party had worked to shape a program more moderate in character than others on the left would have liked. The Socialist Party took positions rhetorically to the left of the Communists, calling for a general nationalization of industry, while the Communist program of September 1935 called only for the nationalization of the great monopolies. [11] The Socialists’ apparent leftism on this question and the Communists’ moderation represented a jockeying for position in an attempt to attract a radicalizing working class while at the same time maintaining an alliance with the Radicals, the petty bourgeois party, and possibly other parties to their right. [12]

In the national elections of May 1936, the alliance of the Communists, Socialists, and Radicals won a majority and formed a Popular Front government with Léon Blum, leader of the Socialist Party as prime minister. The Communists supported the Popular Front government, but declined to participate in the cabinet, as much out of a desire to avoid alienating the Radicals and others to their right as out of a desire to protect their revolutionary credentials on the left.

The Strikes of June 1936

Encouraged by the reunification of the CGT and CGTU and by the Popular Front’s victory in the election, hundreds of thousands of workers struck in factories and other workplaces throughout France in May and June of 1936. While usually described as a “spontaneous” workers’ movement, the strikes were in reality organized by rank-and-file shop floor militants from the CGT and the Communist Party. The Communist Party had been building toward a large strike through organization and mobilization since 1934, in an attempt to establish itself through a mass action as the voice of labor in the Popular Front coalition. But the Communists could not have been successful without the support of a layer of skilled workers and shop floor militants in the plants. This Communist inspired rank-and-file rebellion led to a national strike wave in the form of factory occupations. [13]

While the strikes began in the provinces, they soon spread to Paris, and, while strongest in the largest factories, the strikes quickly spread to every sort of manufacturing establishment and then to many other businesses. Before the strike wave was over there were 12,142 strikes involving 1,831,000 strikers, and of those more than 12,000 strikes, about 9,000 involved the occupation of the factory. [14] The June 1936 strikes represented a national working class movement, a workers’ uprising in the factories. Democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers in the plants, the strikes had the potential to turn France upside down. For the Communists, now committed to a political alliance with the capitalist parties and to strengthening the French government, such a prospect was unthinkable.

The Communists and the Socialists, fearing that the strike could get out of hand and jeopardize political relations with the Radicals, worked to restrain the strikes and to keep them from spreading. Maurice Thorez, head of the French Communist Party, made his famous statement that, "one must know how to end a strike." The Communist call for an orderly end to the strike became the leitmotiv for the entire period. [15] Party and trade union leaders proposed moderate goals, and worked to keep the strikes within the limits of the capitalist system and its political framework. [16]

The Communists—whose role in the labor movement had grown significantly since the reunification of the CGT and CGTU—proved to be shrewd and subtle in controlling the strikes, bringing them to an end, and together with their political partners in the Socialist and Radical parties, playing the role of arbiter between the workers and the employers and government. As the best history of the Popular Front and the strikes of 1936 puts it:

"To retake leadership of the movement, it was necessary to put oneself at the head of it; to discipline it, it was necessary to unify it; to bring it to an end, it was necessary to generalize....The order for a general strike was therefore a tactic designed to take in hand the spontaneous movement." [17]

Or to put it another way, in order to end the strike, the Communists together with the CGT union officials, the Socialist Party, and the Popular Front government which included the capitalist Radical Party, had to take the control of the strike out of the hands of the rank-and-file workers.

The Communists, operating through the CGT, were now in a position in much of the country to take leadership of the strikes, facilitating negotiations with the government, and carrying out the orderly evacuation of the factories. The Communists in this way succeeded in transforming the strikes against the employers into a movement in support of the Popular Front government, while the Popular Front government simultaneously brought employers and unions into tripartite negotiations with the government to reach a national agreement. The Communists' most important consideration throughout was the preservation of the Popular Front government of Léon Blum. [18] With Blum at the head of a Popular Front government, thought Stalin, the Soviet Union would have an ally against Nazi Germany. Stalin's compass in plotting his course was not the needs of the international working class, but rather the defense of the Soviet state.

The Settlement of the June 1936 Strike

The strike settlement which was negotiated by the Popular Front political partners, resulted in both industry-wide agreements, in an enormous growth of the labor union movement, and in the generalization of collective bargaining agreements. On June 7, 1936, the General Confederation of French Employers (CGPF) and the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) under the auspices of the Popular Front government negotiated the Matignon Accords, the most significant labor union victory in French history. The agreement provided for recognition of the unions and their right to strike. The unions also won wage increases of between 7 and 15 percent, with an increase of no more than 12 percent overall for any firm. Though in reality in some industries the wage increases reached 15, 20, or even 25 percent. [19] At the same time the Blum government put forward social legislation which legalized collective bargaining and established the 40-hour work week, two-week paid vacations, and other benefits. [20] The Popular Front labor legislation represented a kind of labor bill of rights unknown before in French history.

After the strike, the CGT grew faster than any labor union movement before it in European history, claiming 5,300,000 members by 1937. The Catholic CFTU also grew from 150,000 to 500,000 members. For the first time in French history, collective bargaining became a widespread phenomenon, with 2,300 contracts registered by 1936 and 8,000 by the outbreak of the war in 1939.

While only 18 were national agreements, there were hundreds of regional pacts. [21] All of this constituted remarkable success in winning both economic reforms and in passing labor legislation. The Popular Front had encouraged workers to fight, and fighting the workers had won what was at one level a tremendous victory. Yet, given the situation both in France and in Europe at the time, even this remarkable victory remained tenuous.

What Was Possible?

While there is no doubt that the strikes and occupations, the union recognition and contracts, and the social legislation represented important victories for the working class, the question is, was it possible to go further? And, more important, was it necessary to go further? At about the same time that Thorez had declared that "one has to know how to end a strike," the left socialist Marceau Pivert and responded with another slogan, "Everything is possible." Pivert's words suggest that the movement could have pressed forward to socialist revolution. Whether or not everything was possible, the question remains, what was possible? Was it possible to have pushed the movement further? And wasn't it necessary to continue to lead the workers' movement further if it was not to be driven back and defeated? Without a doubt the labor movement and the left might have advanced much further, but to do so they would have to have been prepared to act independently.

But the Communist Party hesitated to lead the working class in taking steps to further workers' power because it feared that that might have threatened its alliance with the Socialists and Radicals. While a kind of de facto workers' power existed in many of the larger factories, the Communists did not call for creating workers' factory committees to run the factories, nor did they take the more radical step of beginning to create workers' councils, institutions of workers' economic and political power on the model of the Russian Revolution in its first few years. [22] Nor did the Communists fight for really strict and effective wage and price controls, and consequently within a few months of the end of the strikes, "Price rises rapidly negated the increases in wages." [23] While there were nominal price controls, they were neither adequate nor effective and workers' wage gains quickly began to evaporate because of inflation at a rate of 25 to 40 percent. [24]

The Communists might also have called for the nationalization of industries and workplaces under workers' control as a step toward the creation of a socialized economy. The Socialist Party and the CGT favored nationalization of selected industries, and even the Catholic trade unions had become sympathetic to the notion. The Communist Party, however, never raised the idea of the nationalization of industry during the Popular Front period (except for the nationalization of munitions plants). This was, in part, because their earlier program (from the Third Period) argued that only revolution could achieve nationalization of industry; and, in part, because after 1935 they feared alienating their bourgeois allies. The Popular Front government of Prime Minister Camille Chautemps, nevertheless, did in 1937 nationalize the financially collapsing railroads by acquiring 51 percent of the stock, but that was nationalization under the capitalist state's control, without union or worker participation in management. [25]

During the Popular Front, the Communists were often less radical than the Socialists and the CGT, and certainly less radical than many working class militants. Why did the Communists hesitate to build workers' power upon the basis of the strikes, the progressive factory legislation, and the Popular Front's electoral success? Why did the party fail to provide political leadership to advance working class power? The reason for the Communists' restraint of the workers' movement was the party's desire to build and maintain a cross-class alliance with the French bourgeoisie and to strengthen the state, particularly to strengthen the military, so that France would be a strong ally of the Soviet Union in the event of an attack by Nazi Germany. To have raised demands such as factory

committees or workers' councils which threatened property and capital's supremacy in the workplace or to have demanded strict and effective controls on prices and profits, which would have regulated or transformed the market, would have placed the Communists at odds with the Radicals and with the haute bourgeoisie, jeopardizing the French alliance with the Soviet Union. Stalin subordinated everything to the survival of his regime in the Soviet Union, including the French working class. The Communist Party was the only party with the authority and organization at the time to have led the working class to expand its power in French society, and its failure to do so would lead to government and employer reaction that would crush the workers' movement. Before turning to that, however, we should discuss for a moment the Popular Front's policies in other areas.

The Popular Front's Foreign Policy

While the Communist Party attempted to moderate the Popular Front as it dealt with labor questions—even in the face of a massive general strike and widespread factory occupations—so too it worked to moderate other policies. Sections of the French left strongly opposed the military, but after 1934 the Communists were not among them. While the Communists had in earlier years been opposed to the military and its budget, they now supported a strong France in alliance with the Soviet Union as a bulwark against Nazi Germany. Though the Popular Front nominally called for peace through general disarmament, neither the Popular Front nor the Communists supported any such policy in reality. They wanted a larger budget for a stronger French army. This had political implications for domestic politics, for the French military, like the military establishment in other capitalist nations, was a mainstay of political conservatism, and the military budget was its life blood. Still, the French state had to be strengthened to resist the Nazis, and so the military budget had to be maintained or even increased.

Among the French left, the Communists had, before 1934, been the most vocal and active anti-imperialists. The Popular Front's role in imperial affairs, however, did not oppose imperialism, but rather aimed at reform, at making the empire more successful by making it more efficient and more humane. While the Communists and the Popular Front removed the notoriously reactionary head of the French overseas empire, they did not change the policies or the staff. As one historian has noted, "The Popular Front government coalition did not...at any stage question imperialism itself, even in its programme for government." [26]

The Communist Party, once historically the most outspoken opponent of French imperialism, now became instead, along with the Socialist Party, an advocate of a more humane empire. For example, rather than supporting Algerian independence, as it once had, the Communist Party now supported the Socialist plan for extending French citizenship to Algeria. [27] During the Popular Front government, though at moments there was a loosening of governmental controls, in general repression of movements for self-determination and independence from the empire continued in Vietnam. [28]

The Communists could not support an anti-imperialist movement because that would weaken France. A strong France capable of fighting Nazi Germany and defending the Soviet Union could be maintained only by maintaining the French empire in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

The Communists Restate their Revolutionary Program

Surprisingly, while the French Communist Party, in order to support the Soviet Union's alliance with France pursued these moderate policies aimed at strengthening the French state and its empire and

at restraining the labor movement and the left, it also paused long enough in the midst of this activity to reassert the party's long term revolutionary goals. Toward the beginning of this Popular Front period, on November 21, 1935, the Communist Party restated its conviction that socialism could come about only through a revolution that destroyed the capitalist state and replaced it with "the dictatorship of the proletariat." This working class dictatorship, the Party asserted, would, unlike Fascist dictatorships, be based on "real freedom and true democracy," where workers and the popular masses elected their own representatives subject to recall at any time. [29]

Yet, even as they restated this commitment to the dictatorship of the proletariat as a model of working class democracy, Stalin was at work in the Soviet Union liquidating the opposition in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, dismantling the workers' councils (soviets), and ending the autonomy of the trade unions. [30] That is, in the Soviet Union, the headquarters of the Communist International which set the policy of the Communist Parties throughout the world, the Stalinist counter-revolution was creating a dictatorship every bit as totalitarian as that of the Nazis in Germany, yet in France, the Communist called for a strategy of achieving workers' democracy and socialist revolution by way of the Popular Front.

What was going on here? How do these three contradictory tendencies—moderate policies in practice, accompanied by calls for revolution in France, and simultaneously a program of counter-revolution and dictatorship in Soviet Russia—coexist? What bound these three incongruous positions together? What held them together was Stalin's need to keep control of the working class political organizations in Europe, parties and movements which he knew could play a decisive role in domestic politics and therefore in shaping foreign policy. To keep control of those increasingly radical movements during times of such tumult, he had to present the Soviet Union and Communism as a revolutionary alternative, even as he carried out a counter-revolution at home. It is this revolutionary ideology and rhetoric that differentiate the Popular Front from simple reformism, the Communist argument that through reformism one can arrive at revolution. [31]

From the Popular Front to the Employers' Offensive

To return to the domestic issues and particularly to labor, the Communists' failure to follow up on the strikes and factory occupations by building workers' power in the workplace and in politics, meant that it was the employers' who took the initiative. The failure to advance the power of the working class meant that the power of the capitalists advanced. In reaction to the strike—which had resulted in union recognition and contracts as well as social legislation, and also in a kind of de facto workers' control over various aspects of the workplace—employers organized and then fought back. During the course of struggles in 1937, the employers created new associations and chambers at the center of the right wing offensive in politics. [32]

So, by the late 1930s, a new right wing, a kind of anti-Popular Front, developed, made up of the old political right, new middle class conservatives, and the employers' associations now under new management. This would be the right wing that would virtually welcome the Nazi invasion and that would form the political base for the Vichy government of France.

While the Popular Front remained in power, it gradually lost ground in society and in politics because it failed to take initiatives in the workplace. The first Popular Front government of Léon Blum lasted only from June of 1936 to June of 1937, to be succeeded by the more moderate socialist government of Camille Chautemps. Blum served as Prime Minister for a month again in the spring of 1938, but at that point the Popular Front, having lasted less than two years, disintegrated.

With the Popular Front having collapsed, Édouard Daladier of the right wing of the Radical Party

served as Prime Minister from April of 1938 to March of 1940, providing political support for an employers' offensive. Despite the Matignon Accords and the social legislation passed by the legislature, employers pushed workers to work more than the 40-hour week and to give up the two-day weekend. The Daladier government issued decrees (*décrets-lois*) reducing social services and increasing taxes on consumption and on wages. Price controls were ended in order to encourage capital to invest.

Workers reacted to the employers' workplace and political offensive in the late autumn of 1938, once again engaging in strikes and factory occupations, but by November 25 and 26 the majority of the factory occupations had ended. Employers responded to the workers' strikes with a lockout. The CGT, forced to respond, countered with a call for a 24-hour general strike on November 30, and, though the response varied in different regions and industries, a majority of organized industrial workers participated in the urban areas, though white collar and service workers were too intimidated to join in.

The Daladier government's response to the strike was brutal, the worst of the inter-war period. The government arrested more than 500 militants, condemning some to a few days in jail while others served terms as long as 18 months. Some union leaders lost their posts in tripartite commissions, while others lost their positions in transportation or the postal service or suffered some sort of sanction. Where the state was the employer there were firings and layoffs, as in the aeronautics industry where 35,000 to 40,000 workers were let go. Many private employers closed their doors, fired everyone and rehired, on the basis of individual not collective contracts, only those they wanted, and they did not want the union militants. At least 800,000 workers lost their union contracts to be rehired as individuals without union protections. In December of 1938 and again in April and May of 1939, the Daladier government issued decrees that effectively ended the 40-hour work week and established a week of 45 hours. Jean Zyromski, a left-wing Socialist labor leader said at the time that "the power of the bourgeois state has been shown to be strong and effective." As the historian of the 1938 strike Guy Bourdé wrote, "November 30 [1938] marked the end of the dream of 1936." [33]

The Communist Party's Popular Front policies of support for the capitalist government had disoriented and disarmed the labor movement and resulted in a catastrophic defeat. With the Popular Front and the unions defeated, and the right wing in power, there remained no effective opposition to Fascism in France. On May 10, 1940 Hitler launched an invasion of the Low Countries and France, and by June 25, the French government signed an armistice. The German Army occupied part of France while the rest of the country was controlled by the collaborationist Vichy government. In France civil liberties and political democracy disappeared, the left was suppressed, and the labor movement was subjugated. Wages and working conditions declined in France, while many French workers were sent to labor in Nazi Germany. By November 1943 over 1.3 million French workers had been sent to Hitler's Germany to work in factories there. [34] The Popular Front had failed in France disastrously.

Conclusion

The Popular Front strategy not only failed to stop fascism in France, but it also tended to disorient the working class, to bring it under the influence and the sway of the bourgeois political parties. At the same time it strengthened the hold of the Stalinist Communism of the Soviet Union over the most political and committed groups in the labor movement. Following World War II, a version of the Popular Front in Eastern Europe served as a phony democratic façade for the imposition of Stalinist Communism on the countries of Eastern Europe by the Red Army's simultaneous "liberation" and

conquest and occupation of those territories. Beyond that, Popular Front politics by other names—such as the Peoples’ Anti-Monopoly Coalition—became a permanent feature of the Communist Party and of other parties influenced by Stalinism, such as the Maoists. The Popular Unity of Salvador Allende (1970-1973), what he called “the Chilean Road to Socialism,” represented yet another Popular Front experience, this time in the Americas, with the same tragic consequences as in Europe in the 1930s. Eventually, what had been Stalin’s Popular Front evolved with the adaptation of the Communist Parties of Western Europe to capitalism and electoralism into what came to be called Euro-Communism. The Communist Parties simply became social democratic Parties by another name.

The tragedy of this Popular Front experience was that another alternative was possible, and that the Communist Party and its Popular Front not only blocked the path forward, but also collaborated with the capitalist class and its state in the suppression of that alternative. Many contemporaries and many students of the period today believe that revolution was possible. But, even if revolution had not been on the agenda, the possibility existed to build institutions of workers’ power, to strengthen the class independence of workers, and to advance the fight for socialism. A revolutionary socialist labor movement would have been a greater bulwark against fascism than the liberal capitalist state.

What might have been done instead? For a moment in the mid-1930s it seemed as if the left wing of the Socialist Party, led by Jean Zyromski and Marceau Pivert, might provide a revolutionary leadership, but Pivert, though he founded the Gauche Revolutionnaire (Revolutionary Left), could not break from the orbit of the Socialists, while Zyromski leaned toward the Communists. [35] Leon Trotsky and his followers in the small Trotskyist group in France criticized the Communist Party and its Popular Front line and proposed a revolutionary alternative, but Trotsky’s small group proved, for whatever reason, ineffective in influencing labor and left politics significantly in that period. [36] The Socialist Party with its long history and the Communist Party with its claim to represent the revolutionary experience of the Soviet Union, and the CGT with its labor union organization continued to exert an unbreakable hold on the French workers.

We have the advantage today, an advantage resulting ironically from the general weakness of the workers’ movement, that we do not have to deal with powerful Socialist and Communist Parties. In the United States at least, no political party has the sort of hold on the working class that the Socialist, Communists and CGT had in France. The same may be said to be true in Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Throughout the capitalist world leftists find themselves in the position of having to rebuild the labor movement and the left from the ground up. [37] Yet, though it is clear that the Democratic Party in the United States is a capitalist party at home which is committed to American imperialism abroad, some on the left propose building the social movements and the left through an alliance with the Democratic Party. While some argue for working within the Democratic Party to capture and realign it, others argue for an “inside/outside” strategy seen as a war of position, taking advantage of the cover of the Democrats to advance the left. As the experience of France in the 1930s demonstrates, such tactics tend to disorient the labor and social movements while bringing them under the sway of a political party with capitalist objectives.

What this means is that, while working to build the grassroots social movements and rank-and-file labor movements which form the motor of workers’ power, we must simultaneously fight for the political independence of the workers movement and of the left. While a rank-and-file perspective is important, we must at the same time find a way to project the notion of workers’ independent political power.

Dan La Botz

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] This paper comes out of a presentation made at the World Peace Forum, Vancouver, British Columbia, November 7-8, 2009.

[2] Historically the CPUSA has since the mid-1930s supported Democrats, even when it ran its own candidates. In 2008, the CPUSA supported and its members worked for Obama's election, though the party as usual argued the need to go beyond Democrats and Republicans and to eventually create a people's party. Eric Mann, whose politics might be characterized as neo-Stalinist, argued "Ten Reasons to Support Barack Obama." Mann also has usually supported Democrats, arguing the need to stop fascism in the United States by forming an alliance with people of color. Bill Fletcher, who comes out of a Maoist background, also supported Obama. "All American progressive should unite for Obama," said Fletcher in an article co-authored with several others. ("Progressives for Obama," The Nation, March 24, 2008.) Fletcher's position of "critical support" is also stated at Money Drives Politics.

[3] Panel "Class or Nation? The Era of the Popular Front," Miguel Figueroa and Dan La Botz, "1929-1939 - From Crash to Catastrophe - A Teach-In on What Happened and Its Lessons for Today - November 7, 8, & 1, 2009 - Maritime Labour Centre, Vancouver, British Columbia.

[4] I hope to continue this analysis of the Popular Front with another paper dealing with Spain to be published in the near future.

[5] Some, following Walter G. Krivitsky, In Stalin's Secret Service: An Exposé of Russia's Secret Policies by the Former Chief of the Soviet Intelligence in Western Europe (University Publications of America, 1985), have suggested that Stalin's search for collective security was only buying time in order to reach an agreement with Hitler. In any case, in the mid-1930s he was seeking

collective security and that principally motivated the Popular Front policy.

[6] Stalin's role in transforming the Soviet Union and the policies of the Communist International, and specifically in using the Popular Front to form alliances with capitalist parties, in order to achieve his foreign policy objectives has been documented and argued in: Fernando Claudín, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform* (New York: Monthly Review, 1975) [Spanish edition 1970], Vol. I, 126-241. Claudín was a leader of the Spanish Communist Party throughout the period he describes and discusses. Many other histories from various points of view document Stalin's policy as well.

[7] Annie Kriegel, *Aux Origines du Communisme Français* (Paris : Flammarion, 1969 [1964]), pp. 377-419, gives the PS and PC membership figures.

[8] Val R. Lorwin, *The French Labor Movement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1954), p. 59 gives French CP membership for 1930.

[9] Lowin, *French Labor Movement*, p. 69

[10] Jacques Delperrié de Bayac, *Histoire du Front Populaire* (Paris : Fayard, 1972), 84-99.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 152

[12] The Socialist Party's radicalism was only apparent, since both the SP and the CGT had long called for the nationalization of major industries as part of their program, while the Communist Party earlier in the 1930s called for workers' revolution with the nationalization of industry to come afterwards.

[13] Jacques Duclos, *Memoires, 1936-1939* (Paris: Fayard, 1969), 145. Duclos, a Communist Party leader, writes of "...the spontaneous movement of factory occupations with the participation of workers who had never before in their lives gone on strike." [My trans.] Studies of the strikes, however, show that it was CGT and CP militants who, following months of propagandizing by the unions and the left, organized the strikes along lines that corresponded to the party's policy. Bertrand Badie, « Les grèves du front populaire aux usines Renault, » *Le Mouvement Social*, No. 81 (Oct. - Dec. 1972), 69-109 ; Raymond Hainsworth, « Les grèves du Front populaire de mai et juin 1936 : Une nouvelle analyse fondée sur l'étude de ces grèves dans le bassin houiller du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais, » *Le Mouvement social*, No. 96 (July-Sept., 1976), 3-30.

[14] Antoine Prost, « Les grèves de mai-juin 1936 revisitées, » *Le Mouvement Social*, No. 200 (July-Sept., 2002), p. 35 and fn. 3.

[15] Jacques Danos and Marcel Gibelin, *Juin 36* (Paris : Maspero, 1972), Vol. I, pp. 116-17.

[16] Georges LeFranc, *Le Front Populaire* (Paris: Press Universitaires de France, 1968), p. 68. I paraphrase LeFranc here. Most historians of the Popular Front recognize the role of the Communist Party in keeping the strike movement from becoming more radical and threatening the Popular Front government.

[17] Danos and Gibelin, *Juin 36*, Vol. I, 68.

[18] Bertrand Badie, « Les grèves de 1936 aux usines Renault, » in: *La France en mouvement, 1934-1938* (Paris : Champ Vallon, 1986), p. 85.

[19] Danos and Gibelin, Juin 36, Vol. I, p. 82; Vol. II, p. 89.

[20] Ibid., Vol, II, 90-96.

[21] Lorwin, Ibid., pp. 74-77.

[22] Anweiler, Oscar, *The Soviets : The Russian Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils, 1905-1921*. New York: Pantheon, 1974; Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control, 1917-1921* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1972); Carmen Siriani, *Workers Control and Socialist Democracy: The Soviet Experience* (London: New Left Books, 1982); S.A. Smith, *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories, 1917-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.)

[23] Lorwin, *French Labor Movement*, p. 79.

[24] Danos and Gibelin, Vol. II, p. 100-104,

[25] Discussions of the nationalization of the French railroads can be found in: Georges Harcavi, "Nationalization of the French Railways," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 201 (Jan., 1939) pp. 217-226, and in, Adolf Sturmthal, "Nationalization and Workers' Control in Britain and France," *The Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 61, Nol. 1 (Feb., 1953) pp. 43-79.

[26] Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *the Popular Front and the Colonial Question. French West Africa: An Example of Reformist Colonialism,* in: Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur, *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front: Hope and Disillusion*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1999), p. 157.

[27] Duclos, Vol. II, 277-80.

[28] For a discussion of the left in Vietnam during this period see, "La Lutte and the Vietnamese Trotskyists," a collection of excerpts from Daniel Hemery's book *Revolutionnaires Vietnamiens et pouvoir colonial en Indochine*, edited by Ted Crawford and published in *Revolutionary History*, Vol. III, No. 2 (Autumn, 1990). Available on ESSF: [La Lutte and the Vietnamese Trotskyists](#)

[29] Duclos, Vol. II, 272-277.

[30] The revolutionary socialist analysis of the Stalinist counter-revolution in Russia was developed by Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1972); Max Shachtman, *The Bureaucratic Revolution: The Rise of the Stalinist State* (New York: The Donald Press, 1962); Tony Cliff, *Russia: A Marxist Analysis* (London: International Socialism, 1964). Shachtman's analysis is compelling (and it is independent of his unfortunate later political evolution).

[31] There is one more element that must be added to this already complicated picture, and that is the very real revolutionary aims of Stalinism as a social system and a political movement. In the years of the Popular Front, 1934-1939 in France, the Stalin's counter-revolutionary transformation of the Soviet Union, that is, the destruction of workers' power and the imposition of a new bureaucratic ruling class, was still in process and not yet complete. What would become clear as that regime established itself was that like other social systems—though for different reasons, through different mechanisms, and with different aims—it too would tend toward conquest and empire. Stalinism, a new social system with its own *raison d'être* was by its very

nature both anti-capitalist and anti-socialist. The tendency of Stalinist imperialism which only became absolutely clear after World War II with the conquest of Eastern Europe and the extension of the bureaucratic communist social system to China, first revealed itself in Spain during the Popular Front period. Unfortunately we cannot take up the complicated events of the Popular Front in Spain in this article, but we plan to return to it in another article in the future.

[32] Ingo Kolbloom, *La Revance des Patrons : Le patronat français face au front populaire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986).

[33] Guy Bourdé, "La grève du 30 novembre 1938," *Le Mouvement Social*, No. 55 (Apr-Jun, 1966), pp. 87-91 ; and Guy Bourdé, *La défaite du Front populaire* (Paris : Maspero, 1977). Citations here from the article. See also, Dano and Gibelin, Vol. II, 127-155.

[34] Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p. 366.

[35] Zyromski, after decades as a leader of the Socialist Party, worked with the Communist Party during the Resistance and joined it in 1945. A brief biographical note on Zyromski can be found in the *Biographical Dictionary of European Labor Leaders*

[36] Trotsky's critique of the Popular Front in France was laid out in his book *Whither France?* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1968) made up of articles written between Feb. 1934 and May-June 1936. First published in English in 1936. For Trotsky's writing on France see, Léon Trotsky, *Le mouvement communiste en France (1919-1939)* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967). Daniel Guérin, who was quite close to Pivert and the *Gauche Revolutionnaire*, writes in his book *Front Populaire: revolution manqué* (Paris: René Julliard, 1963), pp. 65-104, that Trotsky's approach to the French events was imperious, authoritarian, and moreover misguided since the conditions in France did not resemble those of Russia in 1917. He also argues that the Trotskyists attitude toward the mass movements differed little from that of the Stalinists.

[37] I am avoiding here discussing cases such as Cuba and Venezuela which open other complicated questions.