
Notes on the United Front Problem.

by Haim Kantorovitch †

Published in *The American Socialist Quarterly* [New York], v. 5, no. 3 (May 1936), pp. 7-11.

After being defeated at a national convention, by a party referendum, at the NEC meetings, and now in the New York primaries, Louis Waldman, spokesman for the Old Guard in the Socialist Party, laid down (in the capitalist press, of course) conditions under which he would be willing to “make peace.” It never occurred to people like Waldman that he and his followers could remain in the Socialist Party and use all the legal and ethical party channels to persuade the majority of the party members that after all the Old Guard was right. Instead of persuading the majority, the Waldmans, Oneals, and Cahans leave the party, fight it openly in the primaries, and when defeated, lay down conditions of peace. If the majority of the party will bow its head in penitence and accept Louis Waldman’s “peace conditions,” he and his friends will rejoin the party and be willing to rule it.

What are Waldman’s conditions? That the party reject communism and promise (that is, the party should promise Waldman) that under no circumstances will it enter a United Front, or participate in common action with communists. No socialist takes these terms seriously. Even Right Wing socialists know that when Waldman “demands” that the party “reject communism” he only means to convey to the capitalist press

the idea that the Socialist Party is really a communist party in disguise. Even his meager knowledge of socialism and communism makes it impossible to believe that he really thinks that the Socialist Party has become communistic. It is simply a matter of using

the red scare method in his fight for leadership in the Socialist Party.

Waldman, and the Old Guard press in general, consciously confuse two different things that have really nothing in common: United Front and participation of Socialists in common action in which Communists also participate. Here the two extremes meet. The Communist press does the same thing. Even such an innocent thing as the debate between Thomas and Browder was declared a

United Front by both Old Guard and Communists. The motives behind this deliberate confusion are of course different. The Communists do it because they must convince the faithful that reality always follows the resolutions of the Comintern. All these exaggerated and false reports about the success of the United



†- **Haim Kantorovitch** (1890-1936) was born in a small village in Lithuania and came to the United States in 1908. He spent his first years in America as a trade union activist, before becoming involved in the Poale-Zion movement. He wrote prolifically in Yiddish and was fluent in Russian, German, and English as well, working as a teacher in various Workmen’s Circle schools throughout the East. Kantorovitch came to Marxism from his earlier Labor Zionism by reading the philosophical writings of Georgii Plekhanov. He joined the Socialist Party about 1926 and wrote frequently for *Der Wecker* and *The Modern Quarterly* before joining Rand School instructors David P. Berenberg and Anna Bercowitz as the third editor of a new Left Wing theoretical magazine, *The American Socialist Quarterly*, in 1931. As a co-editor of *The American Socialist*, Kantorovitch came to be regarded as one of the most important and influential figures of the Socialist Party “Militant” faction of the 1930s. Kantorovitch died of tuberculosis on August 18, 1936.

Front that fill the columns of *The Daily Worker* are the “evidence” fed to the faithful to show how successful the new line is. The motives of the Old Guard are of course different. They proclaim every participation of Socialists in common action a United Front, hoping thereby to justify their absurd accusation, which they know to be absurd, that the militants are simply “agents of Stalin” in a Socialist disguise.

And yet, these two things, common action and United Front, have nothing in common. When the Socialist Party participates in common action with Communists, it is common action not of these two particular parties. These two are parts of a much larger body. In such common action no agreement is made between the two parties, no compromises and no pledges are given. Both parties come, and may leave, as free agents, bound only by their own programs and principles, and guided by their beliefs as to what is harmful or beneficial to the class struggle. There can be no justification, for instance, for a Socialist local to refuse to participate with other labor or radical organizations in a united May First celebration or Scottsboro defense, or any strike or relief action, simply because Communists also participate in the same actions. The Old Guard Socialists refuse to participate in such common action because they aim to drive out the Communists from the labor movement. They refuse to recognize them as part of the movement. They have simply taken as their guide the old, discarded Communist theory of social fascism. According to this theory the chief enemy of socialism was neither capitalism nor fascism, it was social democracy and the socialist movement generally. The fight against capitalism and fascism is important indeed, but it will have to wait. First comes the fight against the “chief enemy,” the socialist movement. When we are done with this “main bulwark of capitalism,” we will turn our weapons against capitalism and fascism. The history of the communist movement is a history not of fighting capitalism, but socialism. We will not here mention the means used in this fight. The Old Guard in the Socialist Party are novices by comparison with the communist saints.

The Communists have discarded this theory. Have they given it up? We are not so certain that they have. There is enough evidence to make us believe that the “new line” is only a temporary expedient. No one

knows or can foretell when a return to the old line may be “necessary because conditions have changed.” “Conditions” usually change for Communists in accordance with their resolutions. In the Communist universe resolutions do not reflect reality. Reality is supposed to follow resolutions.

Meanwhile, while the Communists have at least for a time given up the theory of social fascism, the Old Guard has taken it up. The name is not there, but the essence is. The Old Guard also maintains that the fight against capitalism, against war and fascism is important indeed, but not as important as the fight against communism. Capitalism and war will have to wait. When we have finished with the chief enemy, the communist movement, we’ll turn our attention to capitalism. Naturally, those who believe that communism is the chief enemy, that the fight against communism must take precedent over everything else, cannot for a moment admit that they can have anything in common with, much less participate in, any common action with Communists.

This is a point of view that cannot of course be accepted by revolutionary socialists. Communism is, for the revolutionary socialist, not the chief enemy. It is part of the revolutionary movement of the working class. Communism represents a theory, a point of view, which the revolutionary socialist believes to be wrong. The road proposed by Communists does not, in the opinion of the revolutionary socialist, lead to socialism but away from it. It is the duty of the revolutionary socialist to use every opportunity to explain to the working class that the Communist way is wrong, that it does not lead to socialism, but it is not the duty of revolutionary socialists to drive the Communists out of the labor movement. They cannot be driven out because they are part of it., The communists are not the only tendency in the labor movement with which Socialists disagree on theory and tactics. There are, and there will always be various tendencies within the labor movement in disagreement with each other. The ideal of one class, one party, (and a monolithic party at that) can only be achieved under a police-dictatorship.

The Communists, however, are not content with such common action. They insist on nothing else than a formal, permanent United Front agreement between the Socialist Party and the Communist Party. *The Daily*

Worker has even threatened that if the Socialists will not listen to reason, the Communists will again resort to the infamous tactics of the United Front from Below. Why are they so insistent on such a formal United Front? What do they hope to gain by it? Before the "new line" was adopted the Communists made no secret about it. Openly and frankly they proclaimed in their press, pamphlets, and official resolutions that the United Front was a maneuver to disrupt the socialist movement. Now, since the new line has been adopted, they continually protest that "this time we mean it seriously." Maybe they do, but they have cried "wolf, wolf!" so often that we are justified in having some suspicions as to whether "this time" they really do mean it seriously and honestly.

A United Front, that is a permanent and national agreement between the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, would mean compromises and sacrifices on the part of both parties. The differences between socialism and communism are fundamental and deep-rooted. In order to arrive at an agreement both parties would have to make some sacrifices and some compromises. A situation may, of course, arise when such sacrifices and compromises may become necessary, when the advantages of united action are so great and so important that no price would be too great for its achievement. But such a situation does not now exist in the US.

"The question of the United Front" rightly declares the resolution adopted at the recently held *Socialist Call* conference, "is not one that involves Socialists and Communists exclusively. The United Front is, first of all, an effort to involve great masses in a common action." Experience in the labor movement has shown, however, that the mere participation of Communists in any action is the greatest obstacle to any united common action. *The Daily Worker* may not like it, but it is nevertheless true; Communists are disliked and distrusted in the labor movement. They are disliked and distrusted not because of what the Hearst press says either about them, or about Soviet Russia, but of what they have done to the labor movement. A party cannot for more than 15 years conduct a war of extermination against the entire labor movement, specializing in character assassination, disrupting everything, breaking up what they could, organizing dual unions and splitting the ranks of the workers, even at

time when they were involved in bitter struggles against their bosses, and then suddenly come out and say: Well, that's over, we won't do it again! Not because we are wrong, not because we have changed our program, but just so. We won't do it again. Henceforth we will be good!

It will take more than a declaration for the Communists to regain the confidence of the labor and socialist movement. It will take years of actual experience, years of service to the labor movement, before the distrust and hatred of communism will disappear (i.e. if the new line will continue that long). At present it is the most serious obstacle in the way of the United Front.

In concluding a United Front with the Communist Party, a United Front which can serve no useful purpose at present, the Socialist Party would take responsibility for whatever the Communist Party did. Of course the two parties would remain separate and independent. The agreement would say so expressly. But in the eyes of the masses the United Front would be the "Communist-Socialist combination," not the Socialist-Communist. The reactionary press, the Old Guard, and the Communists would see to that.

No matter how hard it would be to take the responsibility for the Communist past, it is even harder for Marxian socialists to take any, even the smallest part of, responsibility for the present opportunist, adventuristic policy of the Communist Party. Its present attitude to war and the League of Nations, and its class-collaboration policy, (rather a caricature of class-collaboration) must be fought by every Marxist. There is little space for many illustrations. One will have to suffice. But this one is enough to illustrate the present Communist tactics of United Front. Norman Thomas writes from California in *The Socialist Call* (April 18, 1936):

Our comrades tell me that the Communist Party in California, which has a record of real activity in the labor field, has gone opportunist with a vengeance. In the name of a farmer-labor ticket the Communists are making a hodgepodge platform of planks agreeable to everyone from the Townsendites to Epics (each group presenting its favorite) and then they are asking all candidates on any ticket: "Do you accept these planks?" Those who do are the farmer-labor ticket! That's class collaboration on the worst scale I've heard of from any supposedly Marxist party.

If space permitted we could illustrate this by a

dozen similar reports. Can socialists assume such responsibility and still persist in calling themselves Marxist-socialists?

The Socialist Party would also have to pay for the United Front with its right and its duty to oppose or criticize anything that takes place in Soviet Russia. Again, Communists and many naive *Nation* and *New Republic*-fed Socialists will protest. Communists do not oppose criticism of Soviet Russia or Stalinism — they only demand that it be criticism and not slander. But what does “slander” mean for the Communists? This! *The Daily Worker* of April 16 [1936] finds that Norman Thomas “rehashes again stale slanders against the Soviet Union, slanders usually brought forward by certain well known types of reformists who try to cover up their opportunism with Left phrases....” Now, if the really friendly and always carefully expressed remarks of Thomas about the Soviet Union is slander, what then is friendly criticism?

But there is a better illustration of what friendly criticism of the Soviet Union and of Stalinism means to the Communists. It is the case of Otto Bauer. Otto Bauer has been one of the staunchest fighters for the United Front within the Socialist International. As a result he gained favor in the eyes of the Communist leaders, so much so that *The Daily Worker* even proclaimed in a shrieking headline that “Otto Bauer Points Way to Working Class Unity Against War.” All was well. The American Old Guard even proclaimed Bauer an agent of Stalin. And suddenly the Communist International declared a holy war against Bauer. What had happened?

Otto Bauer published a review of a book on Stalin. He did not praise this anti-Stalin book. He was very critical of the author of the book. However, among other things, he said a few uncomplimentary things about the person of Joseph Stalin, and repeated the well known fact that the history of the Russian Revolution was being falsified under Stalin’s influence, especially in order to erase the role of Trotsky. The leaders of the Communist International at once found that anyone who insulted the “great leader of the world proletariat” was nothing but a Trotskyite. And Trotskyism is of course excluded from the United Front.

We will not repeat here all the vile and false things said in these “war articles” about Trotsky and Trotskyism. They are too ugly to be repeated, but a few direct quotations on what Otto Bauer, or any Socialist may or may not say or write will surely be of interest to our readers. Here are a few:

“To entertain a positive ‘attitude’ towards the Soviet Union, and at the same time to fight Stalin is sheer hypocrisy. Without the leadership by Stalin [not Lenin —H.K.] there would be no Soviet Union today..”

“an attack on Stalin is an attack on the Soviet Union....”

If this is what Stalin has done, the Communist International feels sure that “this road [that is, criticism of Stalin —H.K] leads...to the camp of the enemies of the United Front. (*The Communist International*, February 1936.)

In the January issue of the same journal this is explained in the following words:

“anyone who attacks the person of the great leader of the international and Soviet proletariat is serving the interests of the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie.” (pg. 31)

and again on page 52:

“For as far as we Bolsheviks are concerned, Stalin and the USSR are indissolubly bound together.”

There may be and there are differences of opinion among Socialists about communism and the Soviet Union, but there hardly are any about Stalinism. Stalinism, for all but the faithful Communist, is the perversion of communism. It is socialism degenerated, in spite of the great practical achievements of Soviet Russia, for which no Marxist will make any one individual responsible. But, as we see, the price of the United Front is the worship of Stalin, the cessation of all Socialist criticism of Stalinism.

A situation may arise in this country where the unity of the two parties will be so important that Socialists may even find it necessary to sacrifice the principle of free socialist criticism in order to achieve the United Front. Fortunately, no such situation exists now in America.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2006. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.