

Popular Front is 80 years old

Reflections on the policies of the Popular Front

One cannot deny the significance of the spring events in 1936 for the working class and the popular strata of France. There can be no question of underestimating the importance of this mass strike movement with the constant occupation of enterprises and the social benefits gained: paid leave (15 days), collective agreements and trade union rights, a 40-hour week, etc. It is also necessary to set the record straight: Leon Bloom didn't introduce paid vacations, the workers imposed them as a result of struggle! Today, the bourgeoisie is attacking some of these rights.

From 2012 to 2015, Social Democracy managed the affairs, and (as always) the anti-proletarian policy doubled in size: the national inter-professional agreement that, under the guise of providing additional insurance for everyone, hit the Associations of the Trade Unions clearing the way for the domination of financial groups that control insurance companies; Macron's Law (2015), the provisions of which in many ways return workers to the era of adoption of the Le Chapelier law [\[1\]](#), and which makes Sunday a working day; El Khomri law, which mainly attacks the Labor Code. This is the essence of social democracy: in 1936 Blum signed the Matignon Agreements upon the request of the monopoly bourgeoisie (Council of Regents of the Bank of France), which was the result of proletariat's struggle; and Hollande, Waltz and Amon, upon the request of the same monopoly bourgeoisie, attacked all social gains! This shows whose interests are represented by Social Democracy!

In 2017, the election of Macron made it possible for the monopoly bourgeoisie to accelerate the social crisis, change the political and institutional structure in a violently reactionary sense. In the second round of the presidential elections, we saw that events of 2002 repeat themselves, when all forces were united with Macron under the pretext of an alleged fascist threat. They got the majority of votes, that Macron needed to pursue ultra-reactionary policy in all fields. As you know, the "Yellow Vests" movement and the reaction of the trade unions have violated the government's agenda. But it would be useless to believe that the government gave up on its goals. It is trying to use the contradictions that exist in the movement (and the attitude of trade union leaders) to try to take advantage of this, especially with regard to democratic freedoms, but it's not limited to this field only.

In this text, we would like to return to the Popular Front as the policy of the Communist International and the participating Parties, and hence the French Communist Party, in the perspective of strategic and tactical issues that we must resolve.

Context

It is clear that between the Sixth International Congress in 1928 and the Seventh Congress in 1935, the situation has changed. The economic crisis of 1929 put an end to the relative stabilization of the capitalist system of the previous years. In order to overcome this crisis, monopoly capital tried to further increase its profit to strengthen exploitation. The monopoly bourgeoisie of the imperialist countries, defeated in 1918 (Germany and the former Austro-Hungary) or dissatisfied with the

Versailles Treaty (Italy, Japan), was preparing for war to redivide the world, and others were preparing for the prevention of a potential conflict. But a serious obstacle arose on the way of capital: the October Revolution, which overthrew capitalism and established the dictatorship of the proletariat on one sixth of the globe, and then the establishment of the USSR, which was engaged in the grandiose construction of socialism. The working class in the capitalist world looked at the USSR (including the Social Democrats), which did not know the crisis, and which was also the state that declared peace to the whole world and pulled out of conflict in 1914-1918.

Of course, the bourgeoisie managed to curb the revolutionary movement after the war and the victory of October. In Italy, fascism appeared as a new political form of its domination. All counter-revolutionary reactionary regimes in Europe more or less joined this model. This was supposed to break the revolutionary labor movement, allow financial capital and monopoly capital to impose its law on society, in close alliance with the dominant imperialist bourgeoisie of England, France, Italy and the USA. Everywhere else, bourgeois democracy continued to remain the dominant form of the bourgeoisie. In exchange for some concessions to reassure the revolutionary orientation, Social Democracy completed its unification of 1914 with the capitalist system. In those places, where the social democracy was not represented in the government, it played the role of the left-wing opposition of the bourgeois system, restricting the movement of the masses within the framework of the system, fighting the communists who called the proletariat for revolution! But in those places, where it was inside the government, social democracy showed its true face: in Germany it defeated the revolution in 1918, by ordering to kill Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. And on May 1, 1929 it banned demonstrations, communist newspapers and shot the workers.

The crisis of 1929, sharply aggravating the inter-imperialist contradictions that had already led to the conflict of 1914 (at the end not settled by the gangster treaties imposed, in particular, by French imperialism), returned the war to the agenda. It is necessary to understand how the war ended in 1918, and this was carefully masked by the official history: German imperialism was not defeated from a military point of view. The rising revolution in Germany, Austria-Hungary, forced imperialism, which was destroying the nations, to stop the war. German proletariat, supported by the Soviet Revolution, put an end to the slaughter! The German bourgeoisie should have remembered that. But the crisis hit Germany hard. The monopoly bourgeoisie was looking for a solution that would allow it to:

- Immediately return what was given to the working class and social democracy,
- suppress the working class to increase exploitation
- prepare the war in order to restore the positions lost in 1918 and achieve the goals of 1914, so that the working class wouldn't be able to resist it again.

The German monopolies knew perfectly well that the Social Democratic leaders would eventually accept this program to a large extent, but only after negotiations. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to get rid of the Communist Party and its influence. The Nazi party could solve their problems: it was possible to use the anti-communist participation of social democracy, and then get rid of it in order to do away with any risk of organizing the working class. The program was accepted. Profit increased again.

Therefore, it is not surprising that in other countries the bourgeoisie, that faced the same problems of crisis as in Germany, set itself a goal to achieve the same results. The attempt of the fascist leagues to seize power in France in February 1934 fits well into this perspective. The reaction of the proletariat on February 12 and the merging of the marches of the trade unions and the Communist

Party under the slogans of “Unity of Action” were able to prevent the fascist threat. The example of Germany showed that the division of the working class allowed Nazism to win! Maurice Thorez then came up with the idea of the Popular Front. This initiative was a reflection of the ideas of the leadership of the Communist International and the influence of G. Dimitrov. It is these ideas, supported by French experience, that will lead to the Seventh International Congress of the Communist International in 1935.

Popular Front: strategy or tactics?

The work of the VII Congress of the International will analyze in detail the question of fascism in three aspects:

- Its class character, "open dictatorship of monopoly capital"
- The extermination of communists in Germany
- The threat of war against the Soviet Union (but there are no predictions of an inter-imperialist war the way it will be in 1939)

For the unity of the working class the reports of Pick and Dimitrov analyze in detail the issues of struggle against fascism. Social Democratic policy is being carefully studied. Although it is true that the policy of the Communist Party of Germany is criticized for mistakes, but the responsibility of German Social Democracy is properly disclosed. It is also emphasized that the struggle against fascism is inextricably linked with the struggle for the socialist revolution, since it is capitalism at its imperialistic stage that generates fascism. However, there is no clear answer to the question: “strategy or tactics?” [2]

When applying this policy of the Popular Front, what will allow to put all the emphasis on the fact that the main task of the communists is to fight fascism, in defense of bourgeois democracy, that this struggle goes through a unity with social democracy with its trends being considered as servants of bourgeoisie, the defenders of capitalism? And besides, the congress clears the way for this shift, since, based on the French example, it calls for unity with the bourgeois parties (the radical party), which unite the middle strata of cities and villages.

The merit of this policy is that it will allow the communist parties to better connect with the masses. In Europe, this will prepare the conditions that will allow the communists to lead the liberation movement during the Nazi occupation.

But this is not enough! Communists cannot be mere supporters of national independence and bourgeois democracy. First of all, they are revolutionaries who are fighting capitalism, which breeds fascism and its consequences! Therefore, attacking the system at the source, we can put an end to the evil that it causes. But the congress does not develop another part of the communist policy: a revolutionary strategy, which is closely connected with the anti-fascist battle, and doesn't oppose it.

This controversy will be immediately revealed in France with the help of a large strike movement in May-June 1936, where the communists and class unions will play a decisive role, but the movement will be limited to economic dimensions. The Communist Party does not raise a question of the conquest of power, the nature of the state, but, on the contrary, claims the only need to satisfy the demands. It must be said that there was a strong pressure from those who wanted to isolate the working class in order to easily crush it. One part of the bourgeoisie supported the fascist leagues and encouraged leftist adventurers of all stripes, for example, Trotskyists and anarchists, who were

always ready to serve the monopoly bourgeoisie! The revolution was not yet ripe and the French Communist Party had to avoid the adventure. But with all this, the question was asked, and the party had to clarify the need for it within the framework of the anti-fascist struggle, strengthen and expand the understanding of this need among the proletariat and the masses. However, the proletarian victory at the economic level shouldn't be belittled, it becomes clear that after the cessation of strikes, we do not see the slightest step forward in abandoning class domination of the bourgeoisie and in the emerging of an alternative to bourgeois power (the slogan "Soviets everywhere" was abandoned and never replaced). On the contrary, it was confirmed that with a "democratic", social-democratic government supported by the Communists, the issue of meeting the needs of the masses could be resolved. The possibility of revolution was sent to a mythical future. But this paved the way for the great disappointment that followed so-called "pause" policy of Leon Blum, a socialist and chairman of the Council of Ministers, which was another way to declare that the government is going to pursue a favorable policy for the bourgeoisie. Despite the criticism, the Communists voted for the bourgeois government until September 1938!

The absence of a revolutionary strategy of seizing power by the Seventh Congress of the International and the cancellation of the decisions of the Sixth Congress will have consequences. First of all, because the congress opens the door to the possible participation of communists in the anti-fascist government, i.e. the bourgeois-democratic government, the government of the (social) management of the bourgeoisie affairs! From this point of view, it can be said that this will lead to the participation of Communists in bourgeois governments in different countries, including France, in the program of the National Resistance Council. For a long time, the French Communist Party did not want to adopt a program that was common for all the resistance forces (in which the communists, the social democrats, the Christian democrats, the gaullists participated ...) But at the end of 1943, the Communists changed their mind and accepted proposals that, of course, include social achievements, those ones, that are questioned by the bourgeoisie today, as well as reforms that respond to the desire to develop the bourgeois state through state regulation of monopoly policy reforming the colonial system ... This will eclipse the question of the nature of the state: in fact, the Communists will cherish the illusion of democracy above the classes! But the question of revolution is, first of all, together with the seizure of power, the question of essence of the state. If we cannot solve the problem of overthrowing of a bourgeois state, even the most democratic one, and its replacement with a proletarian state based on the principles of organizing the Paris Commune and the Soviets, without automatically copying them, all revolutionary and democratic achievements are questioned as soon as the bourgeoisie has the opportunity to raise its head relying on ... social democracy. This is what will happen in 1947 (do not forget the US occupation). This is what the Portuguese revolution of 1974/1975 will face [\[3\]](#) , and today there are similar processes going on, such as the one in Venezuela.

This will lead to theoretical and political distortions, sources of weakness and deep divergences in the international communist movement.

Distortion of Marxism-Leninism

In the politics of the Popular Front, we must also recognize the mistakes that could put the communist movement in a difficult situation and hinder it in its revolutionary task.

For example, there is the problem of Cuba, where in the name of the anti-fascist Popular Front, conceived in a single European perspective, the International pushed the Cuban Communist Party

towards an alliance with Batista and his cabal under the pretext that he was a US man, not a Nazi. But does this mean that fascism should be considered only in connection with the situation in Europe? And what will happen to the "good terrorist dictatorships", since they will be connected with the non-fascist imperialist powers? And in addition to Batista, what about Trujillo, Somoza, etc. ...? Of course, it seems that a person who was the general director of the US Communist Party, Browder, who turned out to be a liquidator, has a special responsibility, since it was he who "followed" the Communist Party of Cuba. But this was only possible because there were good conditions contributing to this.

The same logic will prevail in the colonial question. Popular Fronts policy is aimed at fighting fascism in the colonial metropolitan cities. But since this task was actually against the revolution, the result was that everything that could be divided should be discarded. Thus, the fight against colonialism in France, Britain, Belgium and the Netherlands will be put on the back foot. Independence slogans will also be set aside. It is noteworthy that these slogans were used in the period from 1939 to 1941, and then they were not used until 1946. But it was possible to link national independence, liberation, the international struggle against fascism and the defense of the Soviet Union.

But let's not caricature, as we are being offered by petty-bourgeois historians from different horizons: the communist parties never supported colonialism. On the contrary, they wanted to involve the masses of the colonial world (in agreement with the communist parties of the colonies when they existed) in the anti-fascist struggle, convincing them that fascism was the enemy of the oppressed people of the world and the international working class. Moreover, Communist Parties practiced the policies of the Popular Front, and this made a great contribution to isolation of the bourgeois forces, which in national movements listened to the calls of the Nazis and the Japanese militarists, the colonialist circles, whose sympathies for the fascists were barely hidden. But the fact remains: instead of seeking to unite the struggle for national liberation with the struggle of the working class against fascism and the capitalism generating it, the communist movement ultimately subordinated these goals to the goals of the bourgeoisie!

The implemented strategy will allow the communist movement to lead the anti-fascist resistance movement against the occupation authorities in a number of countries, including France, Italy and Greece. However, strictly speaking, the Communists built a revolutionary strategy in none of these countries, although in Italy, the positions defended by Pietro Secchia were the closest to it.

However, we are not saying that the situation was revolutionary: the imperialist troops of the United States, as well as the British, were not paper tigers, as the Greek example clearly demonstrated. But on the other hand, the communists had no other strategy than the one that was implemented during the extension of the Popular Front: unity of the "patriotic" forces and participation in democratic bourgeois governments. It is also true that the masses' perception of the deep conspiracy of the bourgeoisie with the Nazi occupier, derailing of the state machine that led to liberation, the prestige of the Soviet Union and victorious socialism created the illusion that the days of the bourgeois rule were numbered.

But the fact remains: the illusions about the state positioned above the classes, as a simple technical machine for managing society, became even stronger, since the revolution was no longer perceived as the tool that destroys the state of the bourgeoisie. On the contrary, the emphasis was placed on the so-called continuous nature of the process of deepening of democracy towards socialism. National unity (against the trusts and for national independence) is the social basis of support demanded for

the new policy, which is defined from the east to the west of the continent as the “new democracy”, “people’s democracy”. Georgi Dimitrov will go so far as to declare that there is no need for the dictatorship of the proletariat under the pretext of the presence of Red Army on Bulgarian soil. It also emphasizes the need for reunification of the Communist parties with the Social Democratic parties. The Communist Party of West Germany will even fall apart for a few weeks.

Of course, in Eastern Europe, such a policy will allow the working class to come to power in Romania, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Albania, Czechoslovakia, and soon in the GDR. But in the West, this policy will lead to nothing except for the idea that communists can participate in “democratic” governments, that they, in the absence of a revolutionary situation, can build up strength, while antitrust policy based on the alliance of Social Democrats and Communists, would help to create subjective conditions for the revolution.

In France, this concept is the basis of a serious political mistake of 1956, when the Communist Party voted for the transfer of all the powers to Guy Mollet under the pretext that the Socialist Party campaigned for peace in Algeria and that there was a need for some gesture (the French Communist Party at the same time gained a big number of votes in the elections and was undoubtedly the leading party in France). Attempts to analyze the future of social democracy (and not only in France), turned out to be vain. It will move to the last stage of its evolution, which began with the betrayal of 1914, when it moves from the status of “bourgeois party of workers” to the status of “bourgeois parties among workers”.

Perhaps this is too schematic, but it is necessary to emphasize the absence of a specific analysis of social democracy: in 1956 it was the Congress of Baden-Godesberg, where the Social Democratic Party of Germany refuses to refer to Marxism. This did not substantially change anything: even without mentioning the pre-war SPD, we should remember that two-thirds of the parliamentary group of the French section of Workers International voted for the transfer of emergency powers to Petain, and that the policies of the Swedish and Belgian groups contributed to the Collaboration. All this already deserves a deep analysis of post-war social democracy as an agent of American imperialism and of its own.

This is not a matter of self-blame. It is in this issue, as in others, that we need to critically evaluate our activities as communists. Because we cannot look at the policy of the Seventh International Congress from one angle: the impressive progress of communist influence, the preparation of conditions for resistance, the victory against fascism and the conditions for creating a socialist camp. This is not about minimizing this positive aspect. But it must be remembered that the role of the Communists is primarily to allow the working class to overthrow the bourgeoisie, make a revolution and build communism. This is what the evaluation of their activities ultimately depends on. But it is clear that what the thing that was rightly represented as the implementation of tactics for responding to a specific situation, i.e. the policy of exterminating the Communist Party and the threat of war against the Soviet Union, under the pressure of events turned into a political strategy. Experience shows that when tactics turn into a strategy, this is a sign of opportunism! This should be fixed.

First of all, it cannot be ignored that for many years, European Communism has justified its opportunistic mistakes with the experience of the Popular Front’s policy. If it deliberately distorted the facts, it nevertheless proceeded from reality! The advanced democracy in France, the “step” to socialism, which actually set it back on schedule, an alliance with the socialists on a general government program, such as the “historical compromise” of Berlingur in Italy or the policy of Carrillo in Spain, were a part of the continuity of this political heritage and or, more precisely, the opportunistic conceptions launched by it.

In another context, the same applies to the policies of some communist parties in Latin America today, which uncritically participate in or support "progressive" governments, outside of the mass movement and the mobilization of the working class for the socialist revolution.

But the result is before our eyes: failure is obvious everywhere! In the worst case, the parties "committed suicide" (France / Italy / Spain). At best, the masses were able to experience a temporary improvement in their position (Argentina / Brazil / Bolivia / Nicaragua / El Salvador ...). But monopoly capital still stands and ultimately takes its toll, even in those places where it seemed to have lost.

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[1] [The](#) emblematic law of the bourgeois character of the French Revolution was adopted in March 1791 under the pretext of the abolition of corporations, it prohibited all forms of organization of employees, any demonstrations and strikes in order to meet their demands or negotiate wages and working conditions. Marx pointed out that this law is valid in all subsequent regimes. In 1864, Napoleon III, under the pressure from the working class, approved the right to strike. But it was only in the Third Republic that the right of association was recognized, and Le Chapelier's law was abolished. The reason for this law was the fact that any coalition of workers violated the Declaration of the Man and Citizen, which stated that citizens are equal before the law! A person facing the coalition was in a state of inequality. In bourgeois law, a deal is concluded between two equal people. Only Marat protested against this law, but did not understand its social content: in this law he saw only an attempt to prohibit a meeting of passive citizens in order to fight against the aristocracy and the enemies of the revolution.

[2] [The](#) strategy is a part of the communist program of the socialist revolution, the purpose of which is the struggle based on a scientific analysis of social relations. The tactic concerns the implementation of short and medium-term actions aimed at involving the masses in the class struggle in order to combine them with the strategic vision of the communists.

[3] See Analysis of Alvaro Cunhaal at the VII Congress of the Portuguese Communist Party.