

Most detailed discussions about concept of United Front were in the period 1921/1922, in congresses and Executive Committee meetings of Third International.

Those discussions related to specific considerations about the then political situation at that time, and to general considerations about the role and nature of a revolutionary party.

Specific considerations:

- Communist Parties were generally a new phenomenon. Prior to 1917 most Marxists, at least in Europe, had been members of social-democratic parties. But after 1917 independent Communist Parties were established, often through splits in social-democratic parties. How were these new parties to function politically and relate to the still existing social-democratic parties?

- In the immediate aftermath of 1917 the perspective on which the new Communist Parties were based was one of imminent revolution. There were, indeed, revolutionary uprisings, but they were all defeated. By 1921/22 there had been a partial stabilisation of bourgeois rule. Trotsky, "The Question of the United Front": "At that time we all believed that we were already in the full swing of the revolution. ... But the events showed that this appraisal was wrong. During the Third Congress (1921), we discussed this and we said: No, a new stage is now beginning."

- Although the expression does not appear to have been used, there had already been United Front initiatives which had provoked controversy in individual Communist Parties and in the Third International: Social-democratic/Communist Party coalition government in Hungary in 1919; joint action by reformist trade unions and revolutionary workers councils against the Kapp Putsch in Germany in 1920; subsequent calls for an SPD/USPD/trade union government, backed by the German Communist Party, which promised to be a "loyal opposition".

General considerations:

- First sentence in Trotsky's "On the United Front" is: "The task of the Communist Party is to lead the proletarian revolution." That is why Communists had split from social-democratic parties, which had shown themselves (August of 1914) incapable of fulfilling that task. Anyone who does not understand this "does not understand the ABC of Communism and happens to be in the Communist Party only by accident."

- To lead the proletarian revolution, the Communist Party must win over the majority of the working class. Trotsky, "On the United Front": "To achieve it (proletarian revolution) the Communist Party must base itself on the overwhelming majority of the working class. So long as it does not hold this majority, the party must fight to win it."

- The United Front is not an 'add-on' to the role of the Communist Party but fundamental to it. Class struggle is a constant, not something which occurs only in revolutionary periods. Unity in action – between revolutionaries and non-revolutionaries – is a necessity. Trotsky, "On the United Front": "The working masses sense the need of unity in action. Any party which mechanically counterposes itself to this need of the working class for unity in action will unfailingly be condemned in the minds of the workers." Anyone who fails to understand this sees the party as "only a propaganda society and not an organization for mass action."

- Unity in action (i.e. United Fronts) boosts the self-confidence of the working class and the chances of victory. Trotsky, "On the United Front": "The greater is the mass drawn into the movement, the higher its self-confidence rises, all the more self-confident will that mass movement be and all the more resolutely will it be capable of marching forward, however modest may be the initial slogans of struggle."

- Unity in action (i.e. United Fronts) provides an opportunity for Communist Parties to demonstrate that they are the political force most committed to defending and advancing working-class interests: Trotsky, "On the United Front": "It is precisely in the course of struggle that broad masses must learn from experience that we fight better than the others, that we see more clearly than the others, that we are more audacious and resolute."

- Unity in action (i.e. United Fronts) creates more favourable opportunities for revolutionary politics. Trotsky, "On the United Front": "This means that the growth of the mass aspects of the movement tends to radicalize it, and creates much more favourable conditions for the slogans, methods of struggle, and, in general, the leading role of the Communist Party."

- Unity in action (i.e. United Fronts) is unfavourable terrain for the reformist leaders. Trotsky, "On the United Front": "The reformists dread the revolutionary potential of the mass movement; their beloved arena is the parliamentary tribune, the trade-union bureaux, the arbitration boards, the ministerial antechambers."

Specific considerations about the then political situation and general considerations about the role and nature of the revolutionary party combined to underline the need for United Front initiatives:

- It was not an imminently revolutionary situation. But the class struggle continued. Successful prosecution of the class struggle required unity in action.

- If Communist Parties were to fulfil their role as combat organisations and win over the majority of the working class, they needed to engage in unity in action with non-revolutionaries.

Thus, "Theses on the Comintern Tactics" summed up the United Front as:

"The united front tactic is simply an initiative whereby the Communists propose to join with all workers belonging to other parties and groups and all unaligned workers in a common struggle to defend the immediate, basic interests of the working class against the bourgeoisie. Every action, for even the most trivial everyday demand, can lead to revolutionary awareness and revolutionary education; it is the experience of struggle that will convince workers of the inevitability of revolution and the historic importance of Communism."

However, there were a number of 'howevers':

- The tactic was not applicable in all countries. It had no purchase in a country where the Communist Party was very small. It had no purpose where a Communist Party was already dominant.

- A united front could not always be achieved. In many cases, perhaps even most cases, a united front could be only half-achieved or not at all. (But a refusal by reformist leaders to agree to unity in action had itself an educational value.)

- The discussion about the United Front flowed over into, and overlapped with, discussions about transitional demands (what were to be the demands of united fronts?), the workers government (under what circumstances was a workers government a form of united front?), and the anti-imperialist united front (how did the general principles about united fronts apply in imperialist colonies?).

- The discussions of 1921/22 were new. But the substance of the concept of the United Front was not new. It had been inseparable from the history of Marxism over the preceding seventy years, especially in the run-up to the October Revolution (e.g. defeat of Kornilov coup, soviets as a form of united front) and even after the October Revolution (coalition government between Bolsheviks and left Socialist Revolutionaries).

The United Front was not something 'invented' by the Fourth Congress of the Communist International. Even if the term had not been used, it had been 'practised' by (some) Marxists at (some) points in the preceding seven decades.

But the particular political situation and the need to build the newly emerging Communist Parties as combat organisations made the question of the United Front particularly important in 1921/22.

Further reading:

On the United Front:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-2/08.htm>

The Question of the United Front:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1922/02/uf.htm>

Theses on Comintern Tactics:

<https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/tactics.htm>

For the United Proletarian Front:

http://ciml.250x.com/archive/comintern/english/ecci_rilu_manifesto_united_front_1_january_1922.html

Theses on the United Front:

<https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/united-front.htm>

