**Popular Front and the Comintern – Part 1**

The analysis of Trotsky concerning the role of the popular front, and its limitations is well known. Not so understood is the justification by the representatives of the Communist International such as the views of Georgi Dimitrov. This article will attempt to rectify this omission in terms of the outline of a detailed understanding of the views of Dimitrov and the Communist International under the leadership of Stalin. The first document that is being analysed is the speech of Dimitrov entitled: ‘The Fascist Offensive and the tasks of the Communist International in the Struggle of the Working class against fascism’ (Marxist Internet Archive p1-66) This document outlines how in a situation of growing economic crisis and political unrest the bourgeoisie is prepared to support the forces of fascist reaction in order to resolve the situation at the expense of the working class. This development is connected to an offensive against the Soviet Union. The very ability to realise the victory of fascism in countries like Germany indicates the weakness of the working class and the opportunist limitations of Social Democracy which is opposed to the perspective of a united front for combatting the prospect of the victory of fascism. This analysis can only have credibility if the limitations of the various Communist parties is ignored, which also contributed to the possibility of the victory of fascism and the onset of a situation of victorious reaction. Dimitrov argues that German fascism is the most reactionary form of defence of capitalism, and is based on the foreign policy aim of developing a military offensive against the Soviet Union. Hence it is being suggested that the belated recognition that the German fascists are motivated not just by the aims of internal counterrevolution but also by the aspirations to militarily defeat the Soviet Union means that the forces of Stalinism have eventually recognised the importance of opposing fascism. This means that the sectarianism of the Third Period is being implicitly rejected and instead the tactic of the united front is being adopted. However, the question is whether this means that ultra-leftism is being replaced by opportunism, or an accommodation to the view that the defence of bourgeois democracy becomes a priority instead of the task of proletarian revolution. However, Dimitrov would deny these claims and instead contend that fascism is the most counterrevolutionary form of capitalism, and so opposing it represents the form in which the aim of proletarian revolution is being advanced under the present political conditions. The mass base of fascism is the petty bourgeoisie but the ultimate aim is to uphold the interests of the capitalist class against the possibility of proletarian revolution. This means that bourgeois democracy has become replaced by open and repressive dictatorship. The advanced proletariat should not be indifferent to this situation and instead recognising this political distinction should be expressed by the most class conscious sections of the working class and so become an integral aspect of its perspectives. The aim should be to defined bourgeois democracy in the most militant manner possible in order to promote the possibility of making progress towards the realisation of proletarian revolution and so in that manner overcoming the threat of the victory of fascist reaction. But it is also necessary to oppose the reactionary measures of the bourgeoisie which prepared the basis for the victory of fascism.

This analysis would seem to be consistent with the united front tactic of Trotsky, or even a belated recognition that Trotsky had been right about the necessity to reject the sectarianism of the German Communist Party and instead adopt the policy of calling for unity with the Social Democrats. But this recognition of the limitations of the German Communist Party is not part of the approach of Dimitrov. Instead he contends that: “The Social Democratic leaders glossed over and concealed from the masses the true class nature of fascism, and did not call them to the struggle against the increasingly reactionary nature of the bourgeoisie. They had great historical responsibility for the fact that, at the decisive moment of the fascist offensive, a large section of the working people of Germany and of the fascist offensive. A large section of the working people of Germany and of a number of other fascist countries failed to recognize in fascism the most bloodthirsty monster of finance capital, their most vicious enemy, and that the masses were not prepared to resist it.”(p5) Hence Dimitrov excused the sectarianism and passivity of the German Communist Party in these terms. He blamed exclusively the limitations of Social Democracy for the ascendency of fascism to power in Germany and so justified the ultra-leftist policy of social fascism which was promoted by the Communist party as the basis for suggesting that the united front was opposed by Social Democracy. Thus history is being rewritten by Dimitrov in order to excuse the sectarian attitude of the Communists with regards to the Social Democrats. This meant there was no attempt at a proper and genuine attempt to establish the limitations of the Communists in the period before the realisation of power by the fascists in Germany. But in a perceptive manner, Dimitrov did outline how the Fascists had skilfully utilised aspects of the approach of socialism in order to promote their ability to develop a mass appeal. They upheld a type of socialist demagogy in order to disguise their reactionary aims. Thus, despite the various limitations in the approach of Dimitrov because of the interests of Stalinism which he was representing, he was still able to outline important aspects of an understanding of Fascism which had been previously absent from the propaganda of the Comintern. It was admitted implicitly that the German Communist Party had underestimated important aspects of the ability of the Nazis to develop a mass appeal. In a belated manner it was being recognised that the Communist International would no longer underestimate the ability of fascism to develop mass support and so in this sense acquire the capacity to acquire political power. Instead it was being admitted that the Communists because of a better and enhanced understanding of fascism would be able to act in both theory and practice in a more effective manner in order to oppose this reactionary threat. It was being recognised by Dimitrov that the German fascists had successfully been able to utilise an appeal to national interests, which had wide mass support. It was being implicitly suggested that the alternative of proletarian internationalism had not seemed to be credible in this context. It was also acknowledged by Dimitrov that fascism had been able to uphold the approach of anti-capitalism in a skilful and demagogic manner. The result of this situation was that it was being admitted that the Communists ignored this aspect of fascism and instead considered it in a dogmatic and one-sided manner, which underestimated the mass appeal of this reactionary form of politics. Hence it was being admitted that the influence of populist and reactionary nationalism had been underestimated by the Communist International. In this manner Fascism is able to make a demagogic appeal to represent the salvation of the nation. In contrast the revolutionary propaganda of the Communists had underestimated the popularity of this approach and so had not developed a satisfactory alternative, and as a result was not able to develop support within the discontented petty bourgeoisie. Thus, whilst fascism is reactionary and anti-working class it was able to develop mass support as the representatives of national chauvinism, and in that manner was able ideologically to become the expression of the interests of capital in a situation in which the possibility of proletarian revolution was posed.

In other words, whilst ignoring some of the most obvious limitations of the political approach of the German Communist party, Dimitrov did attempt to try and resolve some of its limitations and in that manner provide a more sophisticated analysis of fascism. This implied the necessity of the alternative approach of the united front, or at least a process of transition from the formal acceptance of the united front to a more consistent and principled application of this standpoint. The aim became to unite the different organisations of the working class against the primary antagonistic force of fascism. To this extent the Trotskyists could welcome this belated recognition of the united front but also maintain that this should not mean a justification of an effective denial of the continued importance of the proletarian revolution. In other words the aim of defending bourgeois democracy should not become the pretext for the rejection of the principled tasks of continuing to adhere to the aims of proletarian revolution. However, it was apparently an advance that the issue of the question of the development of a strategy in order to oppose fascism was beginning to be tackled with the seriousness that it required. The defeat of the working class in Germany meant that it was necessary to implicitly reject the previous acceptance of sectarianism and ultra-leftism, and instead the importance of the development of a strategy by which to unite the working class was formally accepted and being promoted by the seventh congress of the Comintern. However, the possibility that an opportunist differentiation between the task of opposing fascism and the aim of proletarian revolution was obviously apparent in the emphasis that was placed upon the importance of defeating fascism. What was the relationship between the immediate significance of the united front and the ultimate necessity to promote the aim of proletarian revolution? Furthermore, how did the obvious importance of the USSR, which was based on the defence of the Soviet Union influence the development of policy? The increasing emphasis of the USSR on the importance of socialism in one country, as the ideology of bureaucracy, meant that the major task of the leadership of the CPSU was in containing the threat of fascism rather than in the advance of proletarian revolution. This meant that the priority of the Comintern in opposing fascism would require absolute importance and the task of international revolution would become a mere formality. However, despite these criticisms it could still be considered a progressive advance for the Communist International, on the basis of the prompting of the CPSU, to take the issue of fascism more seriously. It could be argued that it was an advance for the Communist International to recognise that the threat of fascism was the most important issue for the global working class. It was a limited principled development for the Comintern to recognise that the defeat of fascism had become the most serious task for the working class after the terrible defeat of the Nazis in Germany. It could also be suggested that the development of the united front, and its possible success in the struggle against fascism, would inevitably raise the issue of the significance of proletarian revolution in order to consolidate the defeat of the forces of reaction. Hence against the very intentions of the leadership of the Communist International the emphasis on the urgency of constructing a united front would generate the connected possibility of relating the task of proletarian revolution to the defeat of fascism. The very success of creating a united front would imply that the next logical progression would be to consolidate this development via the act of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. In contrast it would be an opportunist error to try and separate the role of the tactic of the united front from the process of the realisation of the aim of proletarian revolution. Hence, possibly unintentionally the Third International was adopting a principled tactic that could only be successful in terms of its consolidation as an expression of proletarian revolution. Thus, it would be a betrayal of the logic and potential of the united front if it was to be limited to the task of consolidating bourgeois democracy. However, the approach of the Comintern did represent this possibility of an opportunist tendency because of the ultimate mistrust of proletarian revolution expressed by the conservative interests of the Soviet bureaucracy. Nevertheless, despite this problem the Trotskyists should have been more welcoming about the adoption of the united front by the Stalinists because it expressed the potential to not only represent the necessary tactic to defeat fascism, but also in this context represented the most appropriate basis to promote the basis of the success of proletarian revolution. The united front was the form of the content of the proletarian revolution in the context of the counterrevolutionary threat of fascism. Hence the most important question was whether the Communist International would take the principled logic of the united front seriously, or would attempt to dilute its character in terms of reducing this perspective to a more defensive attempt to consolidate bourgeois democracy at the expense of the reactionary threat of fascism. This tension is how the approach of Dimitrov has to be understood.

Dimitrov outlines the development of intense repression by the Nazis since they came into power. This analysis indicates that what is tactically necessary is to oppose the possibility of the onset of fascism in order to ensure that the prospect of the repression of the working class movement and its connected defeat does not take place. This viewpoint also implies that the Communist Party has initially underestimated the extent of the defeat represented by the victory of the Fascists. The point being made was that the serious situation indicated the necessity to ensure that such a tragic development should not be allowed to be repeated. However, Dimitrov was still reluctant to suggest that the major blame for the onset of the power of the Fascists was because of the ultra-leftism and sectarianism of the Communist party. Instead he still blamed the opportunism and passivity of the Social Democrats: “Fascism was able to come to power primarily because the working class, owing to the policy of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie pursued by the Social Democratic leaders, proved to be split, politically and organisationally disarmed, in face of the onslaught of the bourgeoisie. And the Communist Parties, on the other hand, apart from and in opposition to the Social Democrats, were not strong enough to rouse the masses and to lead them in a decisive struggle against fascism. (p9) Hence the actual policy of the Communists, and their rejection of a united front with the Social Democrats, is not called into question, but it is also being implied that this standpoint could have been improved despite the problem of the passivity and class collaborationist approach of the Social Democrats. Thus, it is being implied that the Communists could have, and should in the future, improve their tactics when trying to oppose Fascism. This implicit criticism of their tactics before the onset to power of the Nazis implies that the Communists should in the future adopt an approach that would challenge the Social Democrats to support a more serious and principled opposition to the Nazis. Ironically this view is based on the awareness that the Social Democrats in Austria and France have been active in opposing Fascism. It was the very initiative of the Socialists that was indicating to the Communist International that their sectarian approach towards Social Democracy had become untenable. In both France and Spain the Socialists had become the most principled and active force opposing the forces of right wing reaction. Hence it was necessary for the Communist International to adopt the position of the united front if they were not to be discredited and accused of being indifferent to the problem of the rise of fascism within Europe. This awareness was related to the understanding that the development of repressive dictatorship in Germany indicated that the policy of overcoming the domination of the Nazis in the short term had proved to be illusory. Hence it was necessary to adopt the policy of the united front which recognised that it was vital to oppose the fascist threat as the primary political priority. However, this awareness of the necessity to change tactics was still connected to the view that the Communists were not primarily to blame for the coming to power of the Nazis. In this context the blaming of the Social Democrats for the ascent to power of the Nazis was not modified. But despite this dogmatic adherence to the ultra-left tactics between 1929-33, it could still be argued that the acceptance of the united front tactic was a welcome change by the Communist International.

The problem was that the very aim of the promotion of the necessity of the united front in the present was being undermined by the apparently serious contention that the Communist Party had upheld this approach during the period 1929-33 in Germany. Indeed, Dimitrov argues that the victory of fascism in Germany could have been prevented if the Social Democrats had accepted the supposedly serious attempts of the Communists to establish this type of alliance. The verbal formality of the Social Democrats was no alternative to militant mass struggle to oppose the possibility of the victory of the Fascists. But this view ignored the fact that not only did the Communists reject the proposals of the Social Democrats for a united front, but it also glossed over the occasions when the Communist accommodated to Nazi opposition to the Social Democrats. The fact was the Communists did not consider that the Social Democratic aim to maintain bourgeois democracy was important was apparently creating the very conditions for the ascent to power of the Fascists. The result of this standpoint was an ultra-left indifference to the necessity to develop mass and united struggle to maintain bourgeois democracy against the threat from the Fascists to impose political dictatorship. It was correct for Dimitrov to criticise the Social Democrats for having illusions in the institutions and personalities of bourgeois democracy in order to ensure that fascism should not come to power. But the problem was that the Communist Party did not propose a coherent alternative in terms of the approach of the militant united front. Instead it was content to criticise the Social democrats for their passivity. Furthermore, the Communists effectively rejected the approach of the united front in terms of their rigid and unrealistic conception of the united front from below. Thus, it could be argued that the Communists were adopting the united front without making serious and honest self-criticism of the limitations of their previous approach, which was effectively an expression of political failure. However, despite these obvious flaws in their process of re-orientation it could be argued that what was important was the apparent fact the Communist International was now committed to the standpoint of the united front.

Indeed, Dimitrov was prepared to carry out a limited criticism of the approach of the German Communist party and similar organisations: “In our ranks there was an impermissible underestimation of the fascist danger, a tendency which to this day has not everywhere been overcome. A case in point is the opinion formerly to be met in our Parties that “Germany is not Italy”, meaning that fascism may have succeeded in Italy but that its success In Germany was out of the question, because the latter is an industrially and culturally highly developed country, with forty years of traditions of the working class movement, in which fascism was impossible. Or the kind of opinion which is to be met nowadays, to the effect that in countries of “classical” bourgeois democracy the soil for fascism does not exist. Such opinions have served and may serve to relax vigilance towards the fascist danger, and to render the mobilization of the proletariat in the struggle against fascism more difficult.”(p12) This is the most serious expression of self-criticism which admits that the German Communist Party did to some extent underestimate the seriousness of the fascist threat. Hence in this manner Dimitrov is still able to indicate the apparently primary role of Social Democracy for the victory of fascism in Germany, but also outline the mistakes made by the Communists in this context. However, despite the one-sidedness in his analysis of the rise to power of fascism in Germany, he is making the serious point that the rise of Fascism to power is not inevitable. The workers can defeat the fascists by their mass actions: “Whether the victory of fascism can be prevented depends first and foremost on the militant activity of the working class itself, on whether its forces are welded into a single militant army combating the offensive of capitalism and fascism. By establishing its fighting unity, the proletariat would paralyze the influence of fascism over the peasantry, the urban petty bourgeoisie, the youth and the intelligentsia, and would be able to neutralize one section of them and win over the other section.”(p13) This approach is connected to the role of a revolutionary party which attempts to lead a serious struggle of the workers against fascism. In other words, it is vital that the working class in terms of its militant activity should attempt to maintain the initiative against fascism, and in this manner develop a policy which will enable it to oppose the threat of counterrevolution. Thus, he is outlining the constructive view that it is possible for the working class to develop an effective struggle against Fascism if it adopts an approach that is based on the understanding that it can oppose effectively and defeat fascism with the perspective of a militant united front. This is the aspect of the standpoint of Dmitrov that is most principled, and which should have led to the adoption by the Trotskyists of a policy that contends that it is vital that the apparent determination of the Communist International to effectively confront fascism should be put to the test.

Dimitrov argues that the very repressive actions of the Fascists in Germany has convinced the workers that support for the Social Democratic approach of class collaboration is not sufficient. Instead he argues that sections of the Social Democratic workers, and its left wing elements, have come to support the Communist approach of developing and promoting a militant united front against fascism: “A process of differentiation is taking place in all the Social Democratic parties. Within their ranks two principal camps are forming: side by side with the existing camp of reactionary elements, who are trying in every way to preserve the bloc between the Social Democrats and the bourgeoisie, and who rabidly reject a united front with the Communists, there is beginning to emerge a camp of revolutionary elements who entertain doubts as to the correctness of the policy of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie, who are in favour of the creation of a united front with the Communists, and who are increasingly coming to adopt the position of the revolutionary class struggle.”(p17) This perspective is one sided in that it effectively ignored the uncomfortable fact that it was the initiative and actions of workers influenced by Social Democracy who acted to promote the development of the united front. However, despite the empirical one-sidedness of the perspective of Dimitrov, it could be argued that his conclusion is sound. Within the working class there is a common desire and aspiration to promote the creation of a united front against Fascism. It is necessary that the Communist International should respond to this sentiment by becoming the most consistent advocates of anti-fascist unity within the working class. In other words, the very spontaneous actions of the working class has led to this acknowledgement within the Communist and Social Democratic organisations of the necessity to establish a militant and credible united front bloc. Any tendency towards defeatism concerning the prospects of overcoming fascism should be rejected because the potential of the united front is its ability to overcome the prospects for the success of counterrevolution. In relation to these militant intentions the Trotskyists should have supported this initiative in critical terms. But this would not mean ignoring the problem of the sincerity of the Communist International. Hence it should have been made explicit that the character of the united front should be about successfully realising the task of defeating fascism in order to promote the aim of the success of proletarian revolution. In this manner the Trotskyists would retain their political independence and therefore constitute the left wing of the united front. But it would be premature to hastily suggest that the united front of the Communists and Social Democrats could only be an exercise in opportunism. Instead the urgent task would be to promote the realisation of the potential of the united front in countries like France. The relevant point is that the formation of the united front in countries like France and Spain in 1934-35 was an immensely progressive act. It meant that the possibility to develop united action against fascism and capitalism was being established. Consequently, the process of the undermining of this potential would be an act of tremendous betrayal of the interests of the working class. This prospect was likely because of the opportunist character of both the official communist parties and the organisations of Social Democracy. However, despite this terrible possibility, the immediate and urgent task of the Trotskyists was to provide critical support for the development and promotion of the united front. This was because the united front had the promise of being a genuinely popular and militant opposition to fascism. But within this context any expression of vacillation and betrayal of the potential of the united front should be indicated by the Trotskyists. Primarily it should be the task of the revolutionary Marxists to indicate whether the united front was becoming primarily an instrument to defend bourgeois democracy rather than expressing the militant opposition to fascism. However, such criticism should not result in a rejection of the value of the united front. Instead the distinction between the opportunist possibility of the united front and its actual potential should be indicated. But it could be argued that it was this very distinction that was difficult for the Trotskyists to maintain. They often seemed to reject the importance of the united front in the name of the principles of the class struggle. For example, in 1935 Trotsky insisted that the situation in France was pre-revolutionary and the situation was about preparing for the struggle for power. But this perspective seemed to ignore the fact that only with the development of a successful united front, which was able to effectively oppose the forces of fascist reaction, would it be possible to also promote the task of proletarian revolution. The point was that if there was disunity within the working class, the task of advancing to the task of overthrowing capitalism would be undermined. Hence it was wrong to suggest in a dogmatic manner that the Socialist and Communist parties were betraying the cause of proletarian revolution in conditions which had become favourable to its overthrow. The point was that the promise of ending capitalism would be dependent on establishing the genuine and militant united front of the working class. Thus, the emphasis on criticism of the Socialist and Communist parties in France should be about their inability to establish an effective united front that was able to overcome fascism, and in this manner create the political conditions to end capitalism. Trotsky seemed to ignore this point in his eagerness to criticise the opportunism of the Socialist and Communist parties.

The point being made is that the electoral success of the united front government promoted the development of the class consciousness and radicalism of the French working class. The result was that the workers acted to both oppose fascism and to promote their class interests in terms of strike actions, and this meant the balance of class forces became in favour of the prospect of the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of socialism. It was true that the united front government had a generally reformist character, and was content to maintain capitalism, but this was not the major point. Instead what was important was that it motivated the working class to act more militantly against capitalism. Hence, it was not surprising that Dimitrov acted perceptively to the success of the development of the united front in France. It meant he had to respond positively and constructively if the Communist International was not to be discredited as being sectarian. The result was that at the seventh Communist International conference, Dimitrov came out in favour of the united front. This meant that he had to recognise the revolutionary possibilities of the united front and at least formally acknowledge its potential. This recognition should have been welcomed by Trotsky. In this context what would have been welcomed would have been the development of a political programme for a united front government to enact once it was in power. What is being suggested is that the united front government should have been prepared to promote the aim of uniting the struggle against fascism with that of opposing capitalism. Indeed that was the very point being made by Dimitrov. The role of the Trotskyists should have been to promote a programme for the working class and the united front government to realise, a programme that would represent advances towards the realisation of socialism. Instead of this, Trotsky considers the class struggle in terms that are abstracted from the question of the united front. Instead he contends that the united front is the major problem undermining the development of the possibility of proletarian revolution in France. (Writings on France, Pathfinder Press, 1979 p77) This point was ultimately confirmed, but before this eventuality it would have been more constructive to outline a policy for the united front to realise. Instead of this perspective he outlines a conception of the class struggle in France which effectively ignores the importance of the united front. He equates the character of the united front exclusively in terms of the opportunist limitations of the Socialist and Communist Parties, and so does not accept that the working class was also an active and dynamic aspect of this alliance. Hence, he failed to apply the approach that he outlined in terms of the role of the united front in Germany to his analysis of the situation in France. The result is that his analysis is one-sided, if not somewhat abstract. For example, he does not connect the upsurge in the class struggle in 1936 and 1938 to the fact that the very formation of the united front government has led to this situation. In this context it would have been relevant to call on the united front government to nationalise the firms that have been occupied by the workers. Instead he discusses the character of the class struggle in terms that have no relationship to the role of the united front government, but the point is that the workers have illusions in that form of government, and so it should have been important to address this issue. Instead of outlining the necessary analysis of the relationship of the working class to the united front government there is silence from Trotsky. This means that in a rigid and one-sided manner he poses the issues in terms of the alternatives of proletarian revolution or fascist counterrevolution. The actual dynamics of the situation are not recognised because of the abstractness in his approach, and this means that the very ability to develop a concrete analysis is not elaborated. This means that he does not recognise that the working class still supports the Socialist and Communist Parties despite their opportunism. Therefore, it is vital that this aspect of the connection between the united front and working class is outlined in terms of any strategy or programme. Instead his action programme is developed without this understanding. The result is that the impression is created in which the working class is defined spontaneously as a class force that takes actions without any regards for its relationship to the united front. But this approach is entirely one-sided if not illusory. Indeed, it is the very election of the united front government which inspires the workers to take militant action against the capitalists. This development implies that the major strategic slogan should have been to call upon the united front government to take the power. They should have utilised an electoral majority in order to introduce measures that would have been transitional to socialism. This would have meant the enactment of proposals to nationalise the majority of the economy under workers control. Instead of that Trotsky calls for the formation of committees of action and ignores the necessity to make connected calls on the government. He justifies his one-sided stance in terms of the development of the united front into a class collaborationist Popular front. This point is true, but this situation should not mean the rejection of the importance of a united front government. Instead the revolutionary Marxists should have made the call for the end of the Popular front government and its policy of class collaboration and its replacement by the united front. Indeed, this is a possibility because the workers effectively act as if the government is a united front. They do not recognise the limitations of the Popular Front and instead mobilise in a manner that implies the government should also act against the interests of capital. In other words, it would have been a very popular demand to make the call that the aims of the united front should be realised in terms of the establishment of a genuine anti-capitalist government. The Radicals should be expelled from the government and instead it should be truly responsive to the aspirations of the workers. Unfortunately, Trotsky cannot develop this type of perspective because he prefers to construct what is an imaginary perspective about a pre-revolutionary situation, but this is not based on genuine political content! It is one thing to outline the reactionary limitations of the Socialists and Communists, but it is another thing to omit to connect these mass organisations to the possibilities of realising socialism. The point being made is that instead of empty denunciation of these organisations, Trotsky should have instead put them to the test. He should have made the call for the formation of a united front government that would have been under mass pressure to carry out anti-capitalist measures. Instead he implies that the working class can almost spontaneously carry out and realise the process of proletarian revolution. In this context he calls for the formation of committees of action, but does not outline how they can promote the realisation of the task of proletarian revolution. Instead he outlines that the situation is pre-revolutionary and that thus implies the possibility of victory for the workers is becoming more favourable. But, this is a hopeful scenario because the problem that is not addressed is that the workers have illusions in the United/Popular front government. This means they will not act against capitalism because of this situation. Only to a limited extent will the workers take militant action. Hence, it is vital to raise demands that can overcome this contradiction. The demand should have been made for the united front to act against capitalism, and to encourage the workers to overthrow the system. But Trotsky seems to consider it futile to make demands on the leadership of the united front. But the result of this politics of dogmatic revolutionism is that he does not outline a perspective that can effectively challenge the illusions of the workers in the role of the united front. Merely dismissing the united front as reactionary is not considered to be credible by workers who consider it to be an expression of principled politics. This means that Trotsky is not able to outline a credible strategy because it is not based on the recognition of the importance of the major political parties supported by the working class. Instead he tries to ignore their influence and instead outlines a programme of action that has little relationship to the role of the political parties supported by the workers. In contrast, there are aspects in Dimitrov’s speech to the Communist International which are formally superior to the analysis of Trotsky, because it is at least connected to the importance of the united front. But what is problematical about the approach of Dimitrov is the issue of his sincerity. Is it possible for a representative of the Communist International to be principled and able to outline a credible anti-capitalist programme?

**Popular Front and the Comintern – Part 2**

Dimitrov asks the most important question. How can the working class oppose the ascent to power of fascism? He comments: “Unity of action of the proletariat on a national and international scale is the mighty weapon which renders the working class capable not only of successful defence but also of successful counterattack against fascism, against the class enemy.”(Tasks of the Communist Internationalp18) This perspective would require the joint action of the supporters and parties of the Second and Third Internationals. It is interesting that Dimitrov does not impose any conditions on this possibility of developing this form of united activity. The only condition is a willingness to oppose the prospect of fascism realising political power. In this sense it is quite principled and reasonable for the supporters of Trotsky to support the formation of a united front in these terms. Thus, the development of criticism by supporters of the Fourth International would relate to whether this aim of developing a militant anti-fascist movement was being carried out in practice. In other words, does the political limitations of the forces of Social Democracy and Communism mean that the aim of creating a mass anti-fascist movement is being compromised by the tendency towards opportunism of these organisations? However, despite these qualifications the actual intention to form a united front is essentially a progressive advance that will promote a sense of confidence within the working class that it is possible to overcome the threat of fascism. Dimitrov is also correct to suggest that the formation of the united front will generate the possibility to gain the support of less advanced workers and the peasantry and petty bourgeoisie for the task of opposing fascism. The balance of forces in favour of rejecting the progress of fascism will be immensely advanced in these terms if a genuine mass movement of opposition is being created. The implication is that if a successful anti-fascist movement is being created this will also mean the prospect of proletarian revolution is being promoted because the overcoming of counterrevolution will consequently create the balance of class forces that will result in the potential for the overthrow of capitalism.

But is this potential for a connected relationship between the struggle against fascism and capitalism expressed by the following comment? Dimitrov contends: “The establishment of unity of action of all sections of the working class, irrespective of the party or organization to which they belong, is necessary even before the majority of the working class is united in the struggle for the overthrow of capitalism and the victory of the proletarian revolution.”(p19) And: “The Communist International puts no conditions for unity of action except one, and that an elementary condition acceptable to all workers, viz, that the unity of action be directed against fascism, against the offensive of capital, against the threat of war, against the class enemy.”(p19) These views imply that the issue of opposing fascism is not only the immediate and urgent task of the working class but also that its relationship to the question of ending capitalism is not established. Instead it could be argued that what is being suggested is that the task of rejecting the advance of fascism is not only the major, but is the exclusive task for the working class. In this context the issue of the relationship of this task to the question of overthrowing capitalism becomes ambiguous. Hence, what is being implied is that the prospect of unity of action within the working class can only be developed in relation to the task of opposing fascism. In contrast, it is argued that it would not be possible to develop similar forms of unity of action in relating to the task of ending capitalism. But if this is what Dimitrov is suggesting then it could be implied that the very construction of a mass movement against fascism is both indifferent to and indeed becomes opposed to the aim of overthrowing capitalism. Indeed, the aim to develop unity against fascism becomes the pretext to reject the utilisation of this mass movement against fascism. In this context the character of anti-fascism becomes the defence of bourgeois democracy and is opposed to connecting the struggle against fascism with that of proletarian revolution. However despite this criticism it is also possible to promote Dimitrov’s perspective because he is being principled when he contends that the most urgent and immediate task is to create a mass and militant anti-fascist movement.

Dimitrov seems to answer convincingly the objections to his approach when he comments: “We want unity of action by the working class so that the proletariat may grow strong in its struggle against the bourgeoisie, in order that whilst defending its current interests against ….capital, against fascism, the proletariat may reach a position tomorrow to create the preliminary conditions for its final emancipation.”(p19) This seems to be a principled explanation of the logic and dynamic of the united front. It establishes that the tasks of opposing fascism, in order to defeat this counterrevolutionary threat, means promoting the possibility to make progress towards the aim of overthrowing capitalism. However, this is the general explanation of the standpoint of the united front. In more practical and immediate terms it is also being suggested that the most urgent task is to defend bourgeois democracy. Hence: “But in the capitalist countries we defend and shall continue to defend every inch of bourgeois democratic liberties, which are being attacked by fascism and bourgeois reaction, because the interests of the class struggle so dictate.”(p20) In one sense this position is not unprincipled because only if bourgeois democracy is defended by the militant methods of the united front will it is possible to generate the most favourable conditions for the possibility to realise the task of the overthrow of capitalism. Nevertheless, Dimitrov also maintains that the primary and direct task of the united front is not to establish a socialist regime. He comments: “But are we offering you now a united front for the purpose of proclaiming the dictatorship of the proletariat? We make no such proposal now.”(p20) Thus it would seem that the actual character and aims of the united front is primarily about utilising the defence of bourgeois democracy in order to defeat fascism. It is being explicitly suggested that this task is not connected to the ultimate aim of overthrowing capitalism. This comment seems to contradict the previous claim that the tasks of opposing fascism are connected to the possibility to undermine and overthrow capitalism. Thus, there is an important tension and ambiguity in the standpoint of Dimitrov. It would seem that the immediate and practical task of undermining the strength of fascism is not related to the revolutionary aims of the Communist International. These ultimate aims are for the long term, and are not directly connected to the short term objectives of the Communist parties. However, Dimitrov only seems to make this point in an evasive and implicit manner. Formally, he would contend that the role of the united front is connected to the task of proletarian revolution. But in order to make his approach attractive to the Social Democrats he outlines that the immediate aim of the Communists is primarily and directed to the task of developing unity in action in order to defeat fascism.

But in a promising manner he does contend that class collaboration with the liberal bourgeoisie was not able to generate effective opposition to fascism: “Did the participation of the Social Democratic parties in the bourgeois coalition governments in these countries prevent fascism from attacking the proletariat? It did not. Consequently it is clear as daylight that participation of Social Democratic ministers in bourgeois governments is not a barrier to fascism.”(p21) Thus, it would seem apparent that his approach is principled in that it rejects any accommodation to opportunism by the leadership of Social Democracy in relation to the task of opposing fascism. Instead only militant class struggle methods are acceptable in relation to the task of undermining the fascists. But, it is also being maintained in an explicit manner that the role of the united front should be primarily limited to immediate tasks: “The defence of the immediate economic and political interests of the working class, the defence of the working class against fascism, must form the starting point and main content of the united front in all capitalist countries.”(p21) This formulation could become the justification of an acceptance of the importance of short term tasks in a manner that also undermines the progress of longer term goals such as proletarian revolution. This possibility could take the form of accommodation to the parties of bourgeois democracy in order to create what is considered to be the widest form of anti-fascist unity. In this context the right wing of Social Democracy would be dictating what should be the tasks of the united front. The problem is that Dimitrov has not formulated how and why the success of the united front would also represent progress towards the realisation of the tasks of proletarian revolution. Instead the emphasis is on the importance of the immediate role of the united front, and its relationship to the importance of the overthrow of capitalism is not elaborated. This approach lags behind the consciousness of many workers, both Communist and Social Democratic, who consider the practical importance of the united front in terms of both undermining fascism and promoting the progress of the proletarian revolution. Instead of this recognition of the increasing advanced level of the class consciousness of the workers, Dimitrov comments: “We must not confine ourselves to bare appeals to struggle for the proletarian dictatorship. We must find and advance those slogans and forms of struggle which arise from the vital needs of the masses, from the level of their fighting capacity at the present stage of development.”(p21-22). Thus, it is assumed that there is an immediate stage of the generating of anti-fascist struggle, and its relationship to the tasks of generating the possibility of proletarian revolution is left uncertain and not explained. It is suggested that the working class should oppose the attempts of the ruling class to impose the crisis at their expense, and that the role of the united front should be to militantly defend bourgeois democracy. Furthermore, the possibility of imperialist war should be rejected. However, what is not explained is that the very success of realising these tasks would mean that it would become possible to make progress in the opposition to capitalism.

But at least the possibility of generating the possibility of more ambitious opposition to capitalism is not being rejected. Dimitrov comments: “We must tirelessly prepare the working class for a rapid change in form and methods of struggle when there is a change in the situation. As the movement grows and the unity of the working class strengthens, we must go further, and prepare the transition from the defensive to the offensive against capital, steering towards the organization of a mass political strike. It must be an absolute condition of such a strike to draw into it the main trade unions of the countries concerned.”(p22) Thus in an implicit manner, Dimitrov outlines the principle that the struggle against fascism also has a potential anti-capitalist dynamic. The success in the anti-fascist struggle will generate the political conditions for transition to opposition to capitalism and therefore create the circumstances in which tactics to bring about the overthrow of the system become valid and relevant. This acceptance in a limited and uncertain manner of the possibility and necessity of the tasks of proletarian revolution as part of the logical development of the united front is a welcome aspect of the analysis of Dimitrov. It should be the task of the Trotskyists to elaborate this point and to indicate that any concession to the politics of class collaboration should be rejected as undermining the potential of the united front. However, the problem with the acknowledgement of the revolutionary logic of the united front by Dimitrov is that he also tends to emphasise the primary importance of the immediate and direct role of the united front, which implies a primary concentration of defensive tasks. Thus he comments: “However, to ensure that the workers find the road of unity of action, it is necessary to strive at the same time both for short-term and long term agreements that provide for joint action with Social Democratic Parties, reformist trade unions and other organizations of the working class against the class enemies of the proletariat.”(p22) This is a constructive view, but it implies that the major task of the united front is to establish minimal forms of united action with only the most rudimentary of aims. The problem with this perspective is that it is not elaborated beyond the rudimentary notion of the necessity of joint action and the necessity of agreements between the Communist and Socialist Parties. An actual programme of demands that would generate the possibility to go from defensive to offensive struggle against capitalism is not outlined. For example, there is no mention of the importance of workers militia in order to oppose the fascists, nor is there any attempt to outline what should be a principled programme of a socialist and communist government. Primarily there is no recognition that what would primarily advance the cause of the working class would be the establishment of workers control of production. In other words, the development of a systematic analysis of what could be the character of the class struggle in relation to the generation of the struggle against fascism is not outlined in the analysis of Dimitrov. For example, the possibility of a Socialist based government for the purpose of promoting and realising the potential of opposition to capitalism is not elaborated.

Instead of developing a revolutionary programme in relation to the importance of the united front, and so connecting the struggle against fascism with that of opposing capitalism, Dimitrov outlines the possibility of a people’s front. This ostensibly has the aim of obtaining the support of the peasantry for the united front, but in actuality it seems to represent a formulation that is intended to generate the pretext for unity between the working class with bourgeois parties (p25). This conception seriously undermines all that has been argued by Dimitrov about the revolutionary character of the united front. What is not explained is how the objectives of what are supposed to be either revolutionary or even left wing reformist parties can be reconciled with the opposing and reactionary objectives of bourgeois parties. How would bourgeois or petty bourgeois organisations contemplate the possibility and necessity of militant struggle against fascism? The point is that the influence of the bourgeois parties would undermine the attempt to develop a principled and effective united front. Furthermore, the working class organisations would adapt to the policies of the bourgeois democratic parties in order to establish a people’s front. But Dimitrov does not consider these objections in order to gloss over the reactionary implications of the proposal to create people’s fronts. What he is trying to ignore is the possibility that the creation of a people’s front based on bourgeois democratic ideology would mean that the Socialist and Communist parties had become effective defenders of the capitalist system in the name of opposing fascism. Ultimately the Communist party, despite its supposed revolutionary credentials, would become the expression of the interests of the bourgeois interest against that of the proletariat. Hence despite the formal impressive reasons that Dimitrov has provided in support of the united front of the working class, he is undermining this standpoint in order to justify the rightward opportunist conception of the people’s front. He tries to deny this conclusion by for instance outlining how the people’s front in America would take the form of support for the workers and farmers party that would express the interests of working people and oppressed races. He maintains that such a perspective would be opposed to the interests of both Republican and Democratic parties, but in actuality the logic of this political standpoint will be to uncritically defend Roosevelt’s New Deal. In relation to France the emphasis is on the apparent success of the development of the united front against fascism, which is also connected with the struggle against the capitalist offensive, but this perspective is diluted by the call to create a people’s front. Thus, the emphasis is on the importance of the policy of purging the bourgeois state of supporters of fascism. Furthermore, there is mention of creating links between the army and the action committees for the defence of the republic and the constitution. Hence the character of the people’s front is linked to demands which explicitly uphold the prestige of the bourgeois state, and so deny the importance of a perspective for the overthrow of capitalism. Ultimately this opportunist approach is connected to critical support for the formation of a government which will defend the maintenance of the bourgeois republic. Thus, the ideological role of the People’s front is to uphold the standpoint of uncritical support for bourgeois democracy, and the existing state, as the most effective manner in which fascism can be opposed.

However, the opportunist character of the justification of the people’s front does not mean that the principled character of the united front should be opposed. Instead it was necessary for Trotskyists to outline the contradiction between the united front and people’s front. The former should be critically supported whilst the latter should be vehemently opposed. Hence the attempt to reduce the role of the united front to that of the people’s front should be rejected, and the pro-capitalist perspective of the people’s front should be contrasted to the militant and socialist premises of the united front. Hence Dimitrov was not being opportunist when he outlined the arguments in favour of the united front. Therefore it is necessary to defend his support for the united front in contrast to his unprincipled justification of the people’s front. The point is that the arguments in favour of the united front are connected to the principle of developing militant class struggle as the basis of opposing the possibility of the assumption of power of the Fascists. It is true that this standpoint is not developed into a strategy that is based on the connection of tactics that indicate the policies and aims of the united front, but still despite this limitation what is being advocated is the importance of the activity of the working class in order to defeat fascism. In contrast, the perspective of the Popular front is based on the understanding that the major aim is to unite the parties of the working class with those representing bourgeois democracy in order to defeat fascism. This perspective implies that it is necessary to defend capitalism against the threat of fascism. The apparent socialist implications of the united front are being rejected in this opportunist manner. In other words, the generally principled affirmation of the united front by Dimitrov is essentially being rejected in order to promote what is the class collaborationist standpoint of the popular front. It is interesting that Dimitrov does not apply the approach of the popular Front as a form of mass work within the Fascist countries. Instead he is still advocating the united front as the basis of conducting political activity within the Fascist organisations. In other words, he recognises that the role of the popular front would be irrelevant within the fascist countries because the task is not to defend bourgeois democracy but instead to overthrow the fascist regimes. Hence, the task of the Communist party is to unite the working class and utilise increasing discontent with the Fascist regimes in order to promote the task of their overthrow. In contrast, the approach is different in countries based on bourgeois democracy. This is because a Social Democratic government based on class compromise should not undermine the formation of a popular front, or at least limited agreement of the Communists with this government as the agency to oppose fascism: “Our attitude of absolute opposition to Social Democratic governments, which are governments of compromise with the bourgeoisie, is well known. But this notwithstanding, we do not regard the existence of a Social Democratic coalition with bourgeois parties as an insurmountable obstacle to establishing a united front with the Social Democrats on certain issues.”(p35) In other words the fact that the primary aim of Social Democracy is to defend capitalism should not prevent the formation of a popular front in order to oppose fascism. This standpoint implies that the opportunist and reactionary nature of Social Democracy should in no sense be challenged or opposed if it is still possible to create a popular front against fascism. However, the logic of this standpoint is that the Communist Party by its uncritical attitude towards Social Democracy justifies the acceptance of capitalism in this manner. Its actual criticisms of the reactionary role of Social Democracy become nothing more than a formality. In practice the Communist party becomes merely a supporter of the politics of right wing Social Democracy. Indeed, it is no longer an expression of the promotion of the politics of left wing Social Democracy, instead it becomes merely the political support of the most right-wing forms of Social Democracy in the name of the aims of anti-fascism. Dimitrov justifies his standpoint by suggesting that the Communist parties in countries like Denmark, Sweden, and Belgium, should have been more supportive of measures proposed by the Social Democrats that are in the interests of the working class. This is a valid point to make, but the logic of this criticism should not mean that the role of Social Democracy in defending capitalism should also be effectively vindicated. Instead it is necessary to differentiate between the measures that Social Democracy made which are in the interests of the working class from the overall support of capitalism defended by these organisations. In other words, the application of a genuine united front may represent the call for critical support of Social Democracy, but this approach does not imply that the logic of this standpoint is capitulation to the reformist approach of the mass socialist organisations.

Dimitrov justifies his approach towards Social Democracy in the following manner: “Thus, in countries having Social Democratic governments, the Communist by utilising appropriate individual demands taken from the platform of Social Democracy ministers as a starting point for achieving joint action with the Social Democratic parties and organizations, can afterwards more easily develop a campaign for the establishment of a united front on the basis of other mass demands in the struggle against the capitalist offensive, against fascism and the threat of war.”(p38) This may seem to be a principled approach, but it is vague unless the explicit criteria by which these Social Democratic policies are criticised is the perspective of proletarian revolution. To what extent are the measures of the Social Democrats both an improvement in the social conditions of the working class, and so in that manner contribute to the possibility of developing the conditions for socialism? Or alternatively do the policies of Social Democracy primarily facilitate the stabilisation of capitalism, such as the attempt to implement a Keynesian type economic approach? If the standpoint of the Communist Party is genuinely principled it will be able to evaluate the actions of Social Democracy in a principled manner, or from the standpoint of the interests of proletarian revolution and the struggle against fascism. Formally the views of Dimitrov seem to represent this principled approach, but in practice his formulations could be considered as expressing a subservient accommodation to the reformist inclinations of Social Democracy. Indeed, in the context of the Spanish revolution the national Communist party became the most obedient part of a popular front with the Socialists in the name of opposing fascism. This right-wing trajectory was generated by the prior accommodation to the standpoint of right wing Social Democracy. Thus the Communist International only formally upheld the following formulation of what seems to be a principled understanding of their relationship to Social Democracy: “It must further be born in mind that, in general, joint action with the Social Democratic parties and organizations requires from Communists serious and substantiated criticism of Social Democracy as the ideology and practice of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie and untiring, comradely explanation to the Social Democratic workers of the programme and slogans of communism. In countries having Social Democratic governments this task is of particular importance in the struggle for a united front.”(p39) But this formal adherence to a principled view of Social Democracy was effectively diluted in practice, and increasingly the only apparent criticism concerned the reluctance of Socialists to maintain the limits of the popular front! Generally, the critical attitude of the Communists towards Social Democracy was diluted in the supposed interests of the struggle against fascism. Essentially the Communists became a distinctive component of Social Democracy, but with a continued allegiance to the Soviet Union.

Dimitrov rightly urges trade union unity but this is advocated in the vaguest manner. He does not outline a principled programme in order to enhance the aims of the workers within the unions. However, his standpoint is welcome because trade union unity could only have enhanced the struggle against fascism and capitalism. But it is interesting that his call for trade union unity has no connection with the importance of developing the militancy of the workers, and there is no perspective of transforming trade union disputes into the struggle for workers control of industry. Instead he can only effectively envisage unions in terms of being a forum to unite communist and social democratic workers, and in these limited terms he lacks a programme for the promotion of the cause of the unity of the workers in trade union terms in connection with the role of the class struggle. Instead the aim of unity is outlined in an almost non-political manner and in terms of a generalised and abstract view of the merits of unity. What was omitted in these terms was the importance of a collection of demands that could have connected the aim of unity of the working class with the task of mobilising against capitalism. However, this limitation is not surprising since one of the major objectives of the Communist International seems to have become accommodation to the interests of the trade union bureaucracy and its political allies within right wing Social Democracy. Instead it seemed increasingly obvious that the Communist International was prepared to advocate trade union unity on the terms demanded by the existing bureaucratic leadership of the unions.

Dimitrov accepts that the logic of the united front could be the realisation of a government committed to its principles. The question that arises in this context is whether this would be a government that is primarily based on the acceptance of capitalism, or in contrast would be a workers government that is committed to connecting the struggle against fascism with the aim of promoting the demise of the present economic and political system. Dimitrov accepts that the type of government that he is proposing would not be an expression of the culmination of the class struggle, and so it would not be a revolutionary government that is based on the supremacy of the Soviets. Instead what is being proposed would be a united front government that is dedicated to the task of opposing the influence of fascism and reaction: “It is primarily a government of struggle against fascism and reaction. It must be a government arising as the result of the united front movement and in no way restricting the activity of the Communist party and the mass organizations of the working class, but on the contrary taking resolute measures against the counterrevolutionary financial magnates and their fascist agents.”(p47) But this government will not only have to tackle the issue of the reactionary role of fascism but also will be confronted with important economic and political questions that express the importance of the necessity to overcome the domination of capital and therefore realise the alternative power of the working class. If this united front government evades the issue of ending the domination of capital within society it will as a result become an expression of the very interests of capital. The point being made is that this united front government will inevitably have a reactionary role if it evades resolving the challenge of the domination of capital in favour of the interests of the working class. But Dimitrov does try to evade the importance of the role of capital within society and instead reduces the importance of the political situation to one that is about overcoming the threat of fascism to democracy. He accepts that there is a political crisis because of the influence of fascism which the parties of the bourgeoisie cannot resolve, and so requires the formation of a united front government. The united front government is necessary because the parties within the bourgeois state cannot prevent the ascent to political power of the fascists. This is an important point being made, and so does represent the justification of the necessity to form a united front government as an effective bulwark against fascism. But what is not discussed by Dimitrov is that the very formation of the united front government will generate the expectations of the working class which will be expressed in increased militancy and radicalism. This will result in mass struggle against capital. Indeed, this is what happened in France in 1935-36. The question that will arise in such circumstances is whether the united front government will be prepared to become a worker’s government and so support the transformation of the class struggle into a conscious process of the transformation of society and so realise the advent of socialism. But Dimitrov evades this issue because he is reluctant to support the concept of the formation of a workers government and instead insists that the united front government would be preoccupied with opposing fascism and reaction: “While the Social Democratic government is an instrument of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie in the interests of the preservation of the capitalist order, a united front government is an instrument of the collaboration of the revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat with other anti-fascist parties, in the interests of the entire working population, a government of struggle against fascism and reaction.”(p49) Thus the issue of the importance of the struggle against fascism, as expressed by the role of the united front government, is differentiated from the possibility to develop opposition to capitalism. According to Dimitrov there is no question that the united front government would also embark on measures against capitalism. This would presumably be a diversion from the task of opposing fascism. But he does implicitly accept that the united front government will result in the creation of a mass movement with apparently radicalised intentions, and he outlines this understanding in the following manner: “Inasmuch as this united front movement is a militant movement against fascism and reaction, it will be a constant driving force, impelling the united front government to struggle against the reactionary bourgeoisie. The more powerful this mass movement, the greater the force with which it can back the government in combating the reactionaries. And the better this mass movement will be organised from below…….the greater will be the guarantee against a possible degeneration of the policy of the united front government.”(p49) Thus Dimitrov accepts that the political basis of the united front government has to be the importance of the mass movement of the workers, but he is cautious, if not evasive, about the possible implications of this popular dynamism. The point that he tries to ignore is that a united front government elected with the mass support of radicalised Communist and Social Democratic workers will be under pressure to adopt measures such as extensive nationalisation which represent the potential for transition to socialism. Hence, the struggle against fascism must acquire more general implications such as the promotion of anti-capitalist measures. However, if the united front government was to ignore the potential of the mass movement it would become nothing more than the expression of the interests of the stabilisation of capitalism. But Dimitrov tries to ignore this point because he is content to limit the tasks of the united front government to being about opposing the threat of fascism. The actual dynamics of this aim in terms of the potential for also opposing capitalism in a revolutionary manner is ignored.

But in an unexpected manner, Dimitrov also accepts that the united front government should act in left wing terms: “We demand that it should carry out definite and fundamental revolutionary demands required by the situation. For instance, control of production, control of the banks, disbanding of the police and its replacement by an armed militia, etc.”(p50) This perspective is in a welcome contrast to the previous attempt to merely emphasise the struggle against fascism. In other words, there are two contradictory perspectives in the standpoint of Dimitrov. Trotskyists should have demand that he clarify this ambiguity and emphasise the importance of the apparent affirmation of a revolutionary approach. Thus, the related view that the united front government should be transitional form towards the realisation of the proletarian revolution is also welcome. Unfortunately, these apparent ad hoc and radical comments proved to be merely formal and the aims of the united front government was practically about opposing fascism and the stabilisation of capitalism. It proved reluctant to support the struggles of the workers and ultimately even compromised the struggle against fascism in terms of support for the policy of Non-Intervention in relation to the Spanish events. Given the right-wing trajectory of the united front government, the Communists should have withdrawn support if they were serious about their principles. Instead they became its most fervent supporters. This indicated that the right wing aspects of the approach of Dimitrov were what was most important in his perspectives about the united front government. Hence, he contradicted his most revolutionary view which contended that the united front government would not be able to resolve the crisis of capitalism, and so it would be necessary to go beyond its limitations. On the one hand he comments that: “Final salvation this government cannot bring. It is not in a position to overthrow the class rule of the exploiters, and for this reason cannot finally remove the danger of fascist counterrevolution. Consequently it is necessary to prepare for the socialist revolution.”(p51) If this had been the actual standpoint of the Communist International it would have been principled. But in actuality this approach was merely formal and an ad hoc aspect of Dimitrov’s standpoint. The effective practice of the French Communist party was to be a passive supporter of the united front government which primarily acted to introduce limited reforms, oppose fascism and stabilise capitalism. The Communist party did not adhere to Dimitrov’s intransigent aspects of his perspective which indicated the limitations of the united front government and the necessity to go beyond capitalism. This principled standpoint become what was formal and effectively rejected in the practice of the Communist International.

Dimitrov defended the limited stance of a united front government in terms of the view that the definitive conditions for the overthrow of capitalism had not yet been realised. This view may express a perceptive understanding of the balance of the class forces, but such a standpoint could also become a justification for emphasising the importance of the stabilisation of capitalism instead of preparing for the proletarian revolution. The point that is important to emphasise is to what extent is the Communist International genuinely interested in the task of generating the possibility of international socialism, or does it essentially uphold the primary importance of the diplomatic interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy? According to the comments of Dimitrov the strategy of the Communist International is to promote the realisation of a united front government in order to both oppose fascism and in this militant manner generate the possibility of socialism. To the extent that his strategy is serious he should be critically supported. Dimitrov also suggests that only with the generation of the revolutionary consciousness of the working class will united front governments be possible. This is a valid point. But there is also the possibility that the workers may be more militant and class conscious in comparison to the possible opportunist limitations of the united front government. In this context will Dimitrov support the application of political pressure by the workers on these governments to act in an anti-capitalist manner? The point being made concerns whether the aim of proletarian revolution is the primary concern of Dimitrov, or instead is his major aim to generate the formation of united front governments in order that they can make alliances with the Soviet Union? In other words is Dimitrov seriously concerned to generate class struggle, and in that manner create united front governments that reflect this development and so will act in a genuinely anti-capitalist manner? This is a constant issue created by the apparent tensions and ambiguities in his position. Thus, it is one thing to imply that the political situation has not yet matured in favour of the possibility of socialism, but it is another thing entirely to consequently justify the passive role of a united front government which seems reluctant to adopt militant policies. Hence, will Dimitrov be a left-wing critic of the united front government, or will he instead accommodate to its social democratic limitations? So, what is being argued is that the Communist International has the problem of contradictory aspects of that could undermine its attempt to develop a principled position on the united front. One the one hand the role of Social Democracy, which will primarily act to upheld bourgeois democracy and the stabilisation of capitalism, and on the other hand the reactionary role of the Stalinist bureaucracy. In this context, the attempt of Dimitrov to develop a principled standpoint concerning the united front is subject to these tensions. But within these limitations he has outlined what could be a genuine connection of the united front to the task of proletarian revolution. He contends that the struggle against fascism should become the basis of the process of transition to socialism, and that the united front government should be an important agency of this process of development. This is the policy that revolutionary Marxists should have critically supported but without any illusions about the difficulties in the attempt to realise this perspective.

But, in ideological forms, Dimitrov proposes to adapt to the standpoint of fascism in terms of also providing a competing understanding of the importance of the nation. He comments: “The interests of the proletariat against its native exploiters and oppressors are not in contradiction to the interests of a free and happy nation. On the contrary, the socialist revolution will signify the salvation of the nation and will open up to it the road to loftier heights. By the very fact of building at the present time its class organization and consolidating its positions, by the very fact of defending democratic rights and liberties against fascism, by the very fact of fighting for the overthrow of capitalism, the working class is fighting for the future of the nation.”(p54) It is one thing to suggest that the process of proletarian revolution is in favour of retaining all the achievements of the nation in cultural terms, but it is also vital to outline how the primary character of the class struggle in any given nation is an integral aspect of an international process to realise world revolution. Indeed, it is this internationalist aspect that is integral to the struggle against fascism, which in contrast represents the most reactionary and national interests of monopoly capital. Dimitrov insists that: “Proletarian internationalism not only is not in contradiction to this struggle of the working people of the individual countries for national, social and cultural freedom, but thanks to international proletarian solidarity and fighting unity assures the support that is necessary for victory in this struggle.”(p55) But the character of internationalism is not merely defined by the importance of solidarity, but is instead about developing coherent and united international action in order to undermine and overcome the domination of capital. What is required is a strategy of world revolution, and in this context the role of the national is merely the form of what should be a process of international class struggle. Indeed, this point was indicated when the struggle in France inspired and accelerated the process of opposition to fascism in Spain. But the support of the Soviet bureaucracy for socialism in one country is in an uncomfortable and awkward relationship to this possibility for international development of the class struggle. Thus, it is not surprising that Dimitrov emphasises the importance of the role of nation and nationalism in the class struggle. But what is problematical in his approach is that he does not seem to be aware that it is not possible to undermine Fascism with an alternative appeal to the importance of nationality. Instead such a standpoint represents an ideological concession to fascism. What is being implied is that it is futile or impossible to try to oppose fascism in terms of the emphasis on the contrasting and opposing ideology of proletarian internationalism, which is concretely expressed in the rejection of nationalist demagogy in the interests of the international class struggle. The point was it was not the apparently failed ideology of internationalism which led to the success of the fascist form of nationalism, but instead the failure to apply the important tactics of the united front. It was ultra-leftism and not the advocacy of internationalism which led to the success of the fascists in Germany. But instead of making this lesson, Dimitrov seems to imply that it is vital that in ideological terms the forces of Marxism try to promote a form of Marxist nationalism. But such a standpoint would be an eclectic and unworkable approach that would not convince anyone concerning its validity. Instead what is necessary is to combine the approach of the united front with the development of a coherent strategy of world revolution.

Dimitrov makes an apparently principled commitment to the perspective of the Communist International in the following terms: “The unity, revolutionary solidarity and fighting preparedness of the Communist Parties constitute a most valuable capital which belongs not only to us but to the whole working class. We have combined and shall continue to combine our readiness to march jointly with the Social Democratic parties and organisations in the struggle against fascism with an irreconcilable struggle against Social Democracy as the ideology and practice of compromise with the bourgeoisie, and consequently also against any penetration of this ideology into our ranks.”(p56-57). This view seems to represent a firm combination of revolutionary principles with tactical flexibility. But the problem is whether this approach is being realised in practice. Dimitrov argues that the sectarianism which led to the rejection of tactical flexibility in the past is being resolved, and instead it is vital to gain the confidence of the working class in terms of an approach that is able to enhance the ability of the Communist party to gain mass confidence that its standpoint is accessible, flexible and principled: “For this purpose it is necessary, not to rant about the leading role of the Communists, but to learn and win confidence of the working masses by everyday mass work and correct policy. This will be possible only if in our political work we Communists seriously take into account the actual level of the class consciousness of the masses, the degree to which they have become revolutionised, if we seriously appraise the actual situation, not on the basis of our wishes, but on the basis of the actual state of affairs. Patiently, step by step, we must make it easier for the broad masses to come over to the Communist position.”(p57) The above two comments indicate that whilst not making any concessions to the Social Democrats and their tendency for opportunism, the Communists will also reject their arrogant and futile sectarianism of the past, which meant they were acting in an elitist manner, and so did not genuinely listen to the concerns of the people, with the result that the forces of reaction gained strength and popularity which meant that reaction was able to come to power. Instead of making these mistakes the Communists will attempt to combine tactical flexibility with principles, they will become concerned with the aspirations and concerns of working people, and in this manner promote the aim of realising unity in the most principled and flexible terms. Hence, what is being advocated is an expression of the premises of an authentic perspective that is able to relate tactical flexibility with the standpoint of revolutionary intransigence and the integrity of the Communist Party. Trotsky could not have improved on this elaboration of what should be the political approach and perspective of a genuine Communist Party. Thus, it would seem that the most sensible theoretical criticism that Trotskyists could express in terms of this apparent commitment to flexible revolutionary politics by Dimitrov is to suggest that this advocacy of a principled and tactically astute approach should be carried out in practice. On the one hand the aim to develop the united front should not result in an accommodation to Social Democracy, but also the tendency for sectarian errors should be avoided. Dimitrov makes the important point that in the recent past the approach of the Communist party has often been to over-estimate the prospect for the realisation of proletarian revolution. This has meant that the importance of defensive tactics has been neglected. The significance of the balance of class forces has been ignored, and the actual necessity to gain the confidence of the masses has not been recognised as a priority. Thus, it is vital that both sectarianism and right-wing opportunism be overcome in the political practice of Social Democracy. He makes the important point that the advocacy of the united front does not mean reconciliation with Social Democratic ideology. In other words, the promotion of the united front should mean the rejection of the ultra-left sectarianism of the past, but it should not result in accommodation to the primary objectives of Social Democracy. Instead what is implied is that the process of the practice of the united front should mean that the radicalised workers who support Social Democracy, and left-wing sections of Social Democracy, are won to adherence to the objectives of the Communists for the promotion of proletarian revolution and socialism.

Thus, if we appraise the approach of Dimitrov, we could argue that apart from some aspects of accommodation to opportunism, he has potentially outlined an expression of a principled policy in relation to his conception of the united front. It would be an immense advance if the various Communist parties actually expressed in practice the aims of Dimitrov concerning the role and importance of the united front. However, what has not been thoroughly elaborated is the actual strategy of the process of development of the united front in relation to the realisation of proletarian revolution. This apparent omission could become the basis to be content with the apparent success of a united front that is entirely concerned with opposing fascism. Ironically, the major social force that would be dissatisfied under these circumstances would be the left wing workers who support Social Democracy. Dimitrov ignores the fact that what has made the united front possible is the process of radicalisation within the leftward inclined sentiments of the Social Democratic workers. Thus the developments within the class struggle are not solely dependent on the actions of the Communist party. Instead it is possible for the Communists to advocate that the united front become an expression of the aims of socialism because of the generation of militancy within the working class as a whole. Instead of this recognition, Dimitrov seems to conveniently blame the limitations of Social Democracy for a possible inherent inability of a united front government to make further advances towards socialism. He does recognise that the militancy of the Social Democratic workers is creating the conditions for the formation of a united political party. He outlines a collection of conditions for this possibility to occur. Firstly, complete independence of the Social Democracy from the bourgeoisie. Second, unity of action. Third, the aim of the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of a Soviet regime. Fourth, opposition to the bourgeoisie in an imperialist war, and fifth, the importance of democratic centralist organisational practices. These criteria are too rigid. Primarily the emphasis on democratic centralism would imply that only a Leninist type of party organisation is acceptable. But most ironically, the very commitment of the Communist International to the united front, and then the role of the popular front, implied that the other conditions for unity could not be realised in practice because of the very opportunist tendencies of the Communist International. Hence it was the opportunist trajectory of the Communist International which meant that in practice these conditions for the unity with Social Democracy became an illusion. Tragically, four out of the five conditions were both a reasonable and principled basis for unification with Social Democracy. It could have been entirely possible to achieve this type of unity in countries like France and Spain because of the leftward process of radicalisation of the Social Democratic workers.

However, there is also an important tension in the approach of Dimitrov in that he elevates the importance of practice above that of theory: “Because unity of action to repel the offensive of capital and of fascism is possible and necessary even before the majority of the workers are united on a common political platform for the overthrow of capitalism, while the working out of unity of views on the main lines and aims of the struggle of the proletariat, without which a unification of the parties is impossible, requires a more or less extended period of time. And unity of views is worked out best of all in joint struggle against the class enemy today.”(p60) This point is valid, but it ignores the significance and importance of the development of the actual radicalisation of the workers who support the promotion of the united front and so are becoming receptive to the possibility of the creation of a united organisation. In this context the standpoint of Dimitrov is dogmatic and rigid. He does not allow for the possibility that a relaxation of the conditions for the creation of a united party might under the present conditions of militancy generate the possibility of making progress in relation to this organisational aim. Thus, it could be argued that the rigidity of the Communist International with regards to the issue of unification with Social Democracy could be rejected in terms of a willingness of the Communists to relax their conditions for membership. For example, the five conditions outlined by Dimitrov could be reduced to an emphasis on complete independence from the bourgeoisie and the importance of unity in action. In that manner the importance of the overthrow of capitalism would become an integral aspect of the successful realisation of these two major and mobilising demands. Hence it would be a formality to insist on the five demands for unity. Instead it would be more relevant and still principled to maintain that any accommodation to bourgeois democracy be rejected by the united front in order to promote militant anti-fascism. Ironically, even this demand could not be upheld by the united front formed in France. This development was an actual betrayal of the Social Democratic workers who were increasingly supporting militant actions that had an increasing potential to go beyond the limits of capitalism. In contrast, the practice of the Communists increasingly could not be reconciled with the promise of the theory. In theory, Dimitrov maintains that only a party with the aims of promoting Soviets, opposing imperialist wars and the organisational principles of democratic centralism, can be effective in opposing capitalism, but the actual political activity of the Communist International would mean that there was a difference between theory and practice. However, to some extent these contradictions are being tackled in a progressive manner because of the militant actions of the Social Democratic workers who are spontaneously generating the possibility of a united front. Thus: “We welcome the growing efforts of the Social Democratic workers for a united front with the Communists. In this fact we see a growth of their revolutionary consciousness and a beginning of the healing of the split in the working class.”(p62) Thus it was the depth of this process of radicalisation within the Social Democratic workers that is primarily generating the principled aspects of the approach of Dimitrov. He seems to seriously be trying to relate to developments within the class struggle and understand the priorities and requirements of the concrete situation. Hence his aim to overcome the isolation of the revolutionary vanguard and achieve unity seems to be serious and an expression of overcoming the limitations of the sectarianism of the recent past. He also acknowledges that the problem of right opportunism will have to be overcome in relation to the advocacy of the united front. Bu there are two major problems with this perspective. Firstly, the programme of a united front government is not outlined in detail. What should constitute the principled aspects of the policies of the united front government: how can it successfully tackle both the problems of fascism and capitalism? Thus, how should it encourage the working class to militantly struggle and strive to challenge the domination of capital? What role in this perspective is there for the general strike and workers control of production. Furthermore, what demands connect the immediate struggle against capitalism with the aim of socialism? In other words, the problems of a possible opportunist tendency of the united front government is being underestimated, and the depth of the radicalism of the workers, especially those that support Social Democracy, is also not given proper significance. Thus, the actual revolutionary potential of the united front is not being established in theoretical terms. However, it could be argued that these issues could be tackled in a principled manner in terms of the development of the practice of the Communist International and the connected expression of a principled willingness to learn from the complexities of the formation and development of the united front. This would mean that in primary terms the recognition that the most important task of the united front government was the combination of the struggle against fascism with that of socialism.

In a concluding speech to the Comintern Congress entitled ‘Unity of the Working Class Against Fascism’ Dimitrov seems concerned to establish the practicality of the approach of the Communist International, and contends that it is necessary to oppose the limitations of abstract formulas and indifference to the actual balance of class forces, and the ability to relate to the aspirations of working people. But he also makes the interesting and challenging point that the role of the united front is integrally connected with that of the Popular Front. What does this mean? Is the question of adherence to the united front being undermined and compromised? Dimitrov argues that the formation of the popular front is not possible without the prior development and success of the unity of the working class in terms of the generation of the united front. He also argues that with the creation of the popular front that it is still based on opposition to fascism, capitalism and imperialist war. Furthermore, the popular front is initially being justified in terms of its application to the role of the peasantry within the united front. Hence, it would seem that the popular front as being outlined in these terms, is not a dilution of the united front and actually represents similar aims and perspectives. Indeed, the primary issue is still being conceived in terms of the importance of constructing the united front. In this context the crucial question still concerns to what extent is Social Democracy receptive to the aim of the formation of the united front, and what role is the radicalisation of the Social Democratic workers having upon the possibility to ensure that Social Democracy is able to reject its connections with the bourgeoisie. However, despite apparently outlining the important issues in this principled manner, Dimitrov then contends: “For example, it would be wrong to imagine that the united front government is an indispensable stage on the road to the establishment of proletarian dictatorship.”(p12) Is this comment meant to imply merely that there are different forms of the process of the realisation of socialism, or does it represent a tentative recognition that the united front will not go beyond the limits of capitalism? It seems that Dimitrov is contemplating the latter possibility when he also comments that: “The whole question boils down to this: Will the proletariat itself be prepared at the decisive moment for the direct overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of its own power, and will it be able in that event to ensure the support of its allies? Or will the movement of the united proletariat….and the anti-fascist Popular front at the particular stage be in a position only to suppress or overthrow fascism, without directly proceeding to the abolish the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie? In the latter case it would be an intolerable piece of political short-sightedness, and not serious revolutionary politics, on this ground alone to refuse to create and support a united front or a Popular front government.”(p12) In these terms it seems reasonable or pragmatic politics to uphold the view that the primary and most important aim of the united front government is to concentrate on undermining fascism rather than emphasising the possibility to also promote the aim of trying to end the domination of capitalism. This would seem to be an issue dictated by circumstances rather than being an expression of the deliberate dilution of the aims of the united front in order to emphasise the defence of bourgeois democracy. But the very manner in which this justification of the limited character of the role of the united front government seems to be disquieting. What is being justified is the notion that the task of overcoming fascism is distinct from or separate in relation to the task of overcoming capitalism which becomes an unconnected and long-term aim. In this context what acquires immediate and practical importance is merely the defeat of fascism which it is assumed can occur within the limitations of bourgeois democracy. Indeed, the assumption becomes that the overcoming of fascism is about the defence of bourgeois democracy. In this context these tasks are no longer connected with the goal of proletarian revolution which is part of a distant future. But the problem with this standpoint is that it implies that the united front can become a government of class collaboration because its immediate task is to defeat fascism. Such an assumption also creates the basis for the justification of extending the united front to the bourgeois parties. Thus, the previous assumption that the united front is about connecting the struggle against fascism with the advance of socialism is now undermined and replaced by what is envisaged as distinct stages in the overcoming of fascism. Indeed, in its most ambiguous manner the task of socialism is considered to have no direct importance to the defeat of fascism by the united front government. In other words, the view that the working class opposes and defeats the fascists by class struggle methods which advance the process of the proletarian revolution and realisation of socialism has been seriously questioned.

Consequently, it is not surprising that in the name of the defence of the democratic gains of the working class, Dimitrov make an explicit commitment to the upholding of bourgeois democracy. (p13) This is not unprincipled to the extent that bourgeois democracy should be defended against the threat of the fascist counterrevolution which would end the democratic rights of the working class. But the point that is not made is that the most important aspect of the role of bourgeois democracy is that it should become the political basis to prepare and promote the development of the advent of proletarian revolution. Only in that principled manner should the working class carry out a militant defence of bourgeois democracy. Thus, it would be opportunist to attempt to defend bourgeois democracy as if it were a distinct end in itself, and so justified a process of collaboration with the bourgeoisie as the supposed basis to oppose fascism. Instead the united front government can only be justified because it effectively connects the relationship of the task of opposing fascism with the aim of advancing the aim of socialism. Anything else would represent a regression to opportunism. Dimitrov’s formulation that a united front government would be exclusively concerned with opposing fascism makes major concessions to this type of opportunism. Dimitrov justifies his standpoint by suggesting that the attitude that should be developed concerning bourgeois democracy should change in accordance with circumstances. This is an obviously correct point, but this necessity of flexibility should not be utilised in order to justify the effective rejection of the aim of proletarian revolution. The defence of bourgeois democracy should be an expression of how to promote the aim of the overthrow of capitalism, but Dimitrov’s formulations seems to suggest that what has become important in the present is the emphasis on the defence of bourgeois democracy and its relationship to the task of attaining socialism has become obscure. This point seems to be confirmed when Dimitrov contends: “Now the working masses in a number of capitalist countries are faced with the necessity of making a definite choice, and of making it today, not between proletarian dictatorship and bourgeois democracy, but between bourgeois democracy and fascism.”(p14) Dimitrov is right to suggest that the German Communists in 1932 should have had as an important tactical understanding the defence of bourgeois democracy, but this task is only principled and in accordance with the requirements of the class struggle if it is connected to the attempt to advance the aim of socialism. The point is that the defence of bourgeois democracy in that circumstance, and similar situations, is vital in order that the political conditions become created in order that the task of proletarian revolution makes progress. Dimitrov denies that he is compromising the aim of proletarian revolution, but the problem is that he has not outlined the type of strategy that he supports. He has not elaborated any valid conception of the relationship between the defence of bourgeois democracy and the socialist revolution. Instead all that he has emphasised is the importance of upholding bourgeois democracy against the threat of fascism. This means that the role of strategy becomes reduced to the issue of defending bourgeois democracy, and the aim of socialism is reduced to an expression of good intentions. Therefore, there is a tension in the approach of Dimitrov. On the one hand he has outlined a principled strategy which connects the role of the united front to opposing fascism and striving for socialism. On the other hand, his other comments indicate that what is of primary importance is defending bourgeois democracy against fascism. In this context the issue of socialism becomes obscured and what seems important is reducing the question of practical politics to an accommodation to the reformist inclinations of right wing Social Democracy. In this context, revolutionary Marxists should have demanded that the ambiguities in Dimitrov’s position should be resolved in a principled manner in terms of definite and explicit affirmation of the connection between the struggle against fascism and the task of proletarian revolution.

In December 1935 Dimitrov himself seemed to be concerned to resolve this ambiguity with a speech about the Peoples Front. (The Peoples Front p1-14) It is interesting that Dimitrov no longer makes mention of the necessity of the united front. Instead the term that has precedence is that of the people’s front, which he defines as the unity of the working class with the peasantry, middle class and intellectuals. Indeed, he accepts that this approach represents a departure from the emphasis on the united front when he vaguely remarks that some of the left-wing supporters of Social Democracy are still supporting the united front as a more proletarian expression of the struggle against fascism. He comments: “They make the mistake of identifying the policy of the Peoples Front with the policy of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie, and demand ‘a pure working class policy’, declaring that the joint struggle of the working class and the democratic sections of the lower middle classes, the peasantry an intelligentsia against fascism constitutes a retreat from the position of class struggle. But this does not at all mean that the People’s Front policy is identical with the policy of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie it only goes to show that we must patiently explain the class meaning of the People’s front policy to the Left Socialists….” (p3) But the Left Socialists had recognised that with the new orientation towards the Peoples Front there had been an important modification of the approach of the Communist International. This point was expressed in the fact that the primary aim of the People’s front was to construct the widest possible alliance against fascism, and so included the role of bourgeois parties. In these circumstances it was no longer possible to maintain the potential connection between the anti-fascist coalition and the aim of socialism. Instead it was only feasible to maintain that the immediate and most important task was to defend bourgeois democracy from the threat from fascism. In this sense the criticism of the left social democrats that the character of the united front was being seriously modified was correct. Dimitrov tries to suggest that this criticism represents dogmatism when it is necessary to adapt anti-fascist tactics to the particular circumstances in each country. But this approach is flawed because what is considered to be most important for the People’s front is the task of opposing fascism within the context of the defence of bourgeois democracy. The mobilisation of the working class in terms of the principles of the united front is in order to extend and widen this alliance in terms of the premises of the Peoples Front. Thus, the task of opposing fascism in Spain and France is on the basis of the development of the People’s front.

In other words, the period in which Dimitrov advocated the formation of the united front was over a period of about six months. At the seventh Congress of the Communist International he made a speech which generally outlined a principled defence of the perspective of the united front in order to oppose fascism and promote the prospects of socialism. But by December 1935 this approach had become diluted in terms of the advocacy of the People’s front. This modification of perspectives is empirically defended in terms of the urgency of the necessity to defeat the fascist counterrevolution in Spain which has entered into open rebellion against the government. He comments: “The special significance of the Spanish events consists in the fact that they have demonstrated the mighty power of united proletarian action, the power of the People’s front in the struggle against fascism. For it is now clear to everybody that united action had not been achieved between the Communist, Socialist and Anarchist workers in Spain, if a broad fighting front of the Spanish people – from the Communists to Left Republicans – had not been formed, the fascist generals would long ago have established their dictatorship.”(p5) He ignores the actual tensions in this alliance because sections of the Socialist and Anarchists also connect the struggle against fascism with that of socialism. The adherence of the Communist International to the approach of the Peoples Front means that they have become the most right-wing part of the coalition against fascism. They explicitly refuse to recognise any potential for the possibility of promoting the realisation of socialism and instead deliberately limit their approach to the defence of bourgeois democracy. But even this perspective is misleading because the Communists in Spain are trying to promote their own interests and so effectively aim to establish a type of party dictatorship. They defend capitalism in the most bureaucratic manner. They are not trying to establish a genuine form of bourgeois democracy which would allow for the open competition of political parties. However, Dimitrov effectively justifies this authoritarianism in terms of the urgent military need to defeat fascism.

He argues that fascism is intent on promoting the possibility of imperialist war and the end of democracy and so the only alternative is to establish the regime of the Peoples Front: “Fascism is preparing to strike at democracy in France, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, at the democracy of England, Switzerland, Scandinavia and other countries………In order to prepare for a new imperialist war, to seize foreign territories and subject other nations, in order to ensure the unbridled rule of the most reactionary, rapacious elements of finance capital and to organize a crusade against the Soviet Union, fascism needs to smash the working class movement and to destroy European democracy.”(p6-7). In other words Dimitrov is outlining the necessity to unconditionally support the various capitalist regimes in Europe against fascism, and so he effectively rejects the internationalist understanding of the Marxist conception of opposing inter-imperialist war. But his real emphasis in this apparent dilution of a Marxist understanding of war is the importance of defence of the Soviet Union. Thus, it has been the threat to the Soviet Union caused by the aggressive inclinations of fascism which has contributed to the replacement of the united front policy with the emphasis on the importance of the Peoples front. In this context the adherence to a revolutionary perspective has been rejected in order to promote an alliance between the various bourgeois democratic and imperialist powers with the Soviet Union. The exclusive aim of the creation of the Peoples Front must be to defend the importance of democracy: “All adherents of democracy must bear in mind that the fate of anti-fascist democracy in Europe is indissolubly bound up with the fate of the working class, with the establishment of the Peoples Front. Democracy will inevitably perish under the blows of the fascist offensive, if it does not rely for support on the working class and the broad masses of the working people, if it is not prepared to defend itself against fascism by every means at its disposal.”(p7) In other words, the character of the struggle against fascism is reduced to being merely about defending bourgeois democracy. But what this perspective ignores is that many elements within the working class had become radicalised by the very struggle against fascism and were prepared to also strive to realise socialism. The standpoint of the Peoples Front was increasingly in opposition to the aspirations of the more militant workers. This contradiction meant that in Spain a lot of workers came into conflict with the attempt to realise the opportunist logic of the Peoples Front. The result was tensions and ultimately disunity in the anti-fascist bloc. The Communist Party was striving to defend capitalism whilst the most militant workers were instead aspiring to promote the possibility of socialism as the most genuine alternative to capitalism. This meant the Communist Party could only defend its approach by promoting vanguard elitism and suggesting that only it had the exclusive ability to know what was in the interests of the workers. This reactionary elitism indicated the process of opportunist decline from the period when the Communist International briefly advocated the united front. In this context what was being suggested was a policy that could unite the working class in terms of connecting the task of opposing fascism with the aim of realising socialism. But in the Peoples Front period this perspective had been rejected and instead the working class was being coercively persuaded that the major task was the defence of bourgeois democracy. This opportunism was in contradiction with the actual dynamics of the class struggle in countries like Spain and France. The Communist Party became more committed defenders of capitalism than the role of Social Democracy.

Consequently Dimitrov can only justify the Peoples Front by suggesting that its application has been successful in countries like France: “The French proletariat, thanks to the joint action of the Communist Parties and Socialist Parties and the policy of unswerving struggle on the basis of the Peoples Front against the fascist danger, caused fascism to be effectively repulsed and prevented the fascists from establishing their rule.”(p10) But what is not explained is that if the threat of fascism has been overcome effectively, why did this government not then act against capitalism? The reason that is omitted from the analysis is that the character of the Peoples Front is limited to an approach of introducing reforms and defending capitalism. The only reason for Dimitrov to support the formation of a different type of government would be to oppose fascism more effectively. But this task is actually connected with the progress that can be made towards the realisation of socialism. The stronger that the working class becomes because the aim of socialism is becoming closer to realisation the more likely it is that fascism becomes weaker. Dimitrov previously recognised this logic, but his new opportunist standpoint means that he effectively rejects any connection between the struggle against fascism and for proletarian revolution. Indeed, he no longer considers the character of democracy under capitalism as bourgeois democracy, instead he merely utilises the term democracy which has to be defended against capitalism. But there are two different methods by which it can be defended, firstly the approach of class independence and militant action, or secondly by class collaboration. He upholds the second and opportunist approach.

However, Dimitrov attempts to maintain a principled position by suggesting that the Peoples Front can only be successful because of the role of the working class: “The decisive role in the task of establishing a mighty Peoples Front belongs to the working class. It can and must rally around itself all working people, all the forces of democracy, all anti-fascists.”(p11) But what this comment ignores is the crucial issue of the programme and politics that the Peoples Front is based on. The only indication of policy that Dimitrov is willing to outline is the necessity of defending democracy. In this context the question of the importance of socialism and genuine class struggle is ignored. The only aspect of radicalism in his position is the continued emphasis on the limitations and passivity of right wing Social Democrats. But what is ignored is that the Peoples Front explicitly ignores the issue of how to connect the opposition to fascism with the aim of overthrowing capitalism. In this context the Communist International becomes the actual opponent of those political forces within the working class that want to make this connection. The result is that in Spain the Communist Party carries on actual civil war against the radical elements in the Socialist Party and sections of the Anarchists. In this opportunist sense the militant promise of the adoption of the united front approach at the seventh Communist International Congress is being rejected and replaced by an effectively sectarian defence of bourgeois democracy in the most opportunist manner. But this standpoint is defended in the sense that is vital to support the Soviet Union against the threat of aggressive war by the Fascist states. In this context the issue of proletarian revolution becomes considered to be an ambiguous and long term aim which has no actual connection to the priorities of the moment and instead the immediate task is to develop an alliance for peace between the USSR and the bourgeois democratic countries. Obviously, the possibility of such an alliance will be undermined if the Soviet leadership acts in an intransigent manner to support the aim of world revolution. Indeed, this situation meant in practice that the Communist International became an opponent of the advance of proletarian revolution, as in Spain, in order to try and promote the aim of developing an anti-fascist alliance involving the bourgeois democratic countries. In the very name of socialism, the promotion of the Peoples Front meant the rejection of the perspective of international proletarian revolution. This development indicated the ultimate degeneration of the Communist International and its regression to being merely the agency of the Soviet bureaucracy.

But despite the opportunist limitations of the Peoples Front policy the advocacy of the united front approach by Dimitrov had progressive aspects that could be critically supported by revolutionary Marxists. Indeed it was necessary and principled to call on the Communist International to seriously promote the application of the united front approach. If this possibility had been consistently realised it could have advanced the ability of the international working class to both oppose fascism and also make advances in the class struggle. But ultimately it was because of these very progressive aspects of the united front policy which meant that it could not be consistently upheld by the Communist International. This standpoint which had been adopted by the seventh Communist International Congress had been replaced and revised by the adoption of the Peoples Front Approach before the end of 1935. This process of regression meant that the aim of proletarian revolution was no longer mentioned. Instead the major task was defined in terms of defending democracy against fascism. This formulation actually meant the Communists were on the right wing of the political parties of the working class. They became resolute defenders of bourgeois democracy and opponents of the advance of the proletarian revolution. In Spain the Communist Party acted to undermine the militancy of the working class in the name of opposing fascism. Nevertheless despite these limitations we have tried to indicate that there were possibilities, at least for a brief moment in time for the Communist International to adopt a genuinely principled position. But this possibility was obviously undermined by the influence of the Soviet bureaucracy. The aim of this article is to indicate that even in the period of its decline the Communist International could adopt what were genuinely principled positions.