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Marxism

The United Front in the Revolutionary Marxist Tradition

- Features -

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This text is the transcription of a contribution, directly inspired by the formulations of Leon Trotsky, to the debate “Marxism and the Brazilian Revolution” on 13 February 2020. The meeting was organized by the São Paulo region of the *Comuna* tendency of the PSOL, member of the Brazilian section of the Fourth International; Economics lecturer Plínio Jr. (Unicamp) and city councillor Mariana Conti (PSOL) also participated. The transcription is by Fernanda Rocha and Pedro Barbosa.

First of all, I would like to say that it is a great satisfaction to participate in this round table with Mariana, who made a very nice presentation, and with Plínio who also made a beautiful one. And with all those who came to participate in a debate on two very important themes, especially when we approach them together: Marxism and the Brazilian revolution.

As this theme is very broad, I finally prepared something a little different from what Mariana and Plínio have prepared and delivered. Instead of trying to paint a panoramic view, touching on various points, I chose to focus on one aspect. An important aspect of Marxism and the historical experience of revolutionary Marxism, of socialist struggle, let us say, and which takes on a lot of importance in Brazil today, and a very particular importance in the debates we have had within the PSOL [Partido Socialismo e Liberdade]. So, I'm going to take another path.

Revolution, self-organization and the need for unification through struggle

The theme I have chosen to deal with is that of the concept of revolution, which was one of Marx's fundamental ideas. Revolution as a process of self-organization and self-development of the consciousness of the working class – and I believe it is appropriate today to expand this – of the working class and all those oppressed by capital, or who confront capital in various ways. So, the process of revolution is a process of self-organization, of the development of class consciousness itself in the process of struggle and transformation of this mobilization, of this struggle, into a revolution.

As a result of this vision, it is clear that this will apply in different ways depending on the different countries and different social formations, as Mariana and Plínio have said, and in different historical conjunctures, it is the need to fight for the unity of the exploited and oppressed.

This unity, as we know today, perhaps better than it was possible to know in Marx's time, is not something simple. And it's not something given. If we take only the working class, this class does not naturally unify, because it is divided by competition, by the conditions of life in the daily struggle, and even more so in a time of generalized crisis and impasses of capitalism as we experience it.

The unity of the working class and, even more, that of those exploited and oppressed by capital is something that must be the result of an effort, of work, it must be built. I'm not going to elaborate on this theme, just mention it. A party, or more than one revolutionary party, as well as other organizations of the class and exploited and oppressed.

United front and class divisions: reformists and revolutionaries

So it is within this theme that my particular point today lies, it is what has been called, at least since the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, in 1922, the tactic of the united front.

The united front tactic, as formulated by this congress, is a development of this more general idea that it is important to fight for the unity of the working class and the exploited and oppressed. It takes into account something that was already a reality at that time and is still a reality today, perhaps even more so, the fact that there are lasting divisions in the working class and in all the exploited and oppressed. between different political conceptions, different parties, separate trade union organisations and other organisations.

It can be said – this is what was most emphasized at that time, in 1922 – that there is a particularly important division between reformists and revolutionaries. The revolutionaries at that time, from the point of view of the Communist International, were the Communists. As this division exists, and will not cease to exist naturally, spontaneously, effortlessly, it is important to fight for the unity of the working class and the exploited and oppressed.

You might ask: but if we are going to defend unity, would it not have been better to have defended, from the beginning, the idea that all workers' organizations and unions unite in a single party, a single union, a trade union centre and things like that? And the answer given at that time was no, because it is not possible to have reformists and revolutionaries in the same party, because reformists are not only people who have chosen a more moderate path, "we will make reforms, because we are going to go slower" ... No.

The idea affirmed in this discussion was that the reformists express within the working class itself, basically, the interests and pressures of the bourgeoisie. So, it is necessary to defeat them, to conquer the majority of the working class from a revolutionary perspective so that the process of self-organization, of mobilization, can ensue and the revolution will happen.

It was therefore necessary to have a division between distinct parties with distinct perspectives, especially reformists and revolutionaries. But on the other hand, as the majority of the class was not already revolutionary, did not follow the revolutionary party, since a considerable part – and in many countries the majority – was oriented by the reformist parties, belonged to them or sympathized with them, it was necessary to have a united front tactic.

Two aspects of united front tactics: unity and political differentiation

But the tactic of unity was then thought of as something, it must be emphasized, which has two aspects. It was necessary at the same time – this is what is already said in the theses on the united front adopted by the Congress of the Communist International in 1922 – to fight for unity, with the concern of confronting the pressing, immediate needs of the class struggle, of the real class war that already existed at that time, which today is perhaps even bloodier, harder; it is important to have this unity. On the other hand, for the struggle to be victorious, for this unity to be achieved in such a way as to serve the immediate and historical interests of the working class and the exploited and oppressed, it is necessary to stand firm in the struggle for revolutionary ideas, ideas that it is not possible to achieve the objectives and interests of the exploited and oppressed within capitalism – basically defending a revolution means believing that another type of organization of society is necessary, another type of mode of production.

The United Front in the Revolutionary Marxist Tradition

So, for this unity to be able to take place in good conditions, it is necessary that at the same time as we defend unity we continue the political debate, the political criticisms, the struggle to develop the consciousness of the exploited and the oppressed, but each party does it in its own way.

That is very important. When the united front tactic was formalized, say, in the tradition of revolutionary Marxism, at the Congress of the Communist International in 1922, it was already thought of in this way: it is a struggle for unity, unity is necessary, unity strengthens the class, to strike you have to have unity, to confront fascists you have to have unity (even if in 1922 the fascist danger was not very present, but this discussion continued in the following years when fascism became a major problem).

Now this unity does not mean that we will simply forget the differences, that we will leave talking about the differences to another time. No. Unity, so that it can be achieved in good conditions, from the point of view of revolutionary Marxism, means fighting for conceptions of confrontation with capitalism, of non-conciliation with the bourgeoisie, of refusing to remain circumscribed to changes within the order, but defending changes against the order – which is revolution in the end... to defend that is something necessary.

I think this is very important, I will draw attention to this, because one of the things that sometimes appears in the Brazilian debate today, for example, is to say: “Now we must unite to defend popular interests against fascism, against semi-fascists, against proto-fascists, the extreme right and neoliberal reforms. And since we have to fight against this, we are not going to talk about the differences that exist in the popular camp, we will leave aside the criticisms we had made, for example, to talk very concretely about Brazil, the PT and its allies during the whole period when they were in government”.

From the point of view of what the revolutionary conception of united front tactics is, it does not make sense. If we could, in a serious situation, in a situation of hardening of the class struggle, in a situation of class war, if we could leave aside the differences that exist between the classist and reformist sectors, those opposed to the order or integrated into the order, to use an expression that Plínio particularly appreciates, the “left of the order”, if we could leave aside these questions in a time as serious as the one we are experiencing, it would mean that these questions basically do not matter, then we can all be together. But it doesn't work that way. In such a time the differences still exist and even become burning.

As far as Brazil is concerned today, we not only have differences on the question of how to fight against the extreme right, the neoliberals, the proto-fascists under the Bolsonaro government, but we have differences even on such fundamental questions as: we are going to be against neoliberal reforms, or we are going to try to apply them in a barely different way? That is what we are seeing today. The PT, for example, or the PCdoB, or even the PSB, which according to some should be considered a left-wing party (this is not my opinion) ... If we see what the governors of these parties are doing in the area of pension reform, they are applying in the states the same thing that has been done at the national level, and even worse in some cases.

So, in my opinion it is obvious that this idea does not make sense, that we must forget all the differences, since we have to face a much worse enemy – and it is true that Bolsonaro is much worse than the left of the order, I have no doubt about it, worse also than the more traditional or more civilized right, increasingly less civilized, but which was civilized for a long time. Differences continue to be of decisive importance in this struggle that we will have to wage.

To be able to win, we cannot do just anything. I am convinced, and I imagine that a large part of us here are convinced, that we cannot wage a substantial struggle against the extreme right and the extreme neoliberals by taking on and accepting a good part of their economic programme.

The united front tactic is something fundamental, but it does not in any way mean, and it cannot mean, that the differences cease, that the debates cease. No. On the contrary, it is a time when it is also necessary, in order to show the best way to fight against the extreme right, and so on, we must also debate the substance of the orientation of the struggles.

United front, “popular front” and the need for a comprehensive alternative

Another thing is that we cannot fight consistently against the measures of a government such as the one we have today without presenting an overall alternative. Because we will be called to account on that. And to present an overall alternative we cannot repeat what has failed in the past.

One more thing. There is great confusion in the debate that has been conducted in Brazil, and even within the PSOL, about the tactics of a united front and what has traditionally been called a “popular front” – tactics of the popular front – which was a unity that included bourgeois sectors. When it was formulated in France, for example, the popular front tactic included the Radical Party, which was a party with a mainly petty-bourgeois and peasant base, but which was the party that had remained the longest in the bourgeois governments of France in the 20s and 30s.

The idea of defending the importance of the workers’ united front implies unifying the working class for its own interests, against the bourgeoisie. So, it should not be confused with a so-called broadening of this front to bring in bourgeois sectors and parties. And there’s a reason for that. To make a front that includes bourgeois parties, it is necessary to limit the workers’ and popular demands so that the bourgeoisie accepts, so that the bourgeois parties accept. It is necessary to start curbing the struggles, otherwise these allies will not agree.

In the case of Brazil, in order to make an alliance with liberals we will have to conduct a discussion, which they consider to be responsible, on the reforms – in truth counter-reforms – that are proposed. There is no possibility of trying to broaden unity to sectors of the bourgeoisie without weakening the struggle, without reducing the scope of the struggle, without demobilizing sectors that will no longer feel represented, because the defence of fundamental questions is dropped.

Does this mean that we will not unite with liberal sectors on specific issues? No. There are specific areas where this can be done, for example against the interference of this government to restrict the freedom of the press. To defend freedom of the press today, we can make an alliance with the liberals. But this is a specific alliance on a specific point, that we can do and that in general we have made, and no one questions that.

This does not in any way mean that we can make a broader alliance to fight, for example, for democracy, because this is something extremely vague. Fighting for democracy is all well and good, but we need to know what struggle for what goal. We cannot have the same conception of what it means to fight for democracy as the bourgeois parties. Moreover, we cannot have the same conception as parties which, in the recent past, have defended, for example, legislation restricting popular mobilizations, the so-called anti-terrorist law.

In sum, we can have unity on specific points with liberal sectors, but to seek a broader unity, we can only do it with sectors that are part, that represent, that have a base among the working class, the exploited and the oppressed. Because it is only with these sectors that there will be a possibility of achieving common platforms and even so it will not be easy. Even so it will be necessary to count on the mobilization, for example, of the reformist party rank and file so that there is an opportunity to fight more coherently against the right, the ultra-neoliberals, and so on.

United front and class struggle: defensive and offensive

Another thing I would like to address. There is a discussion that has come up a lot in Brazil, a way of asking the question contrary to the tradition of the debate on the workers' united front in the socialist movement; it is argued that the united front is a defensive tactic: "when we are on the defensive, this is where we have to make unity in a very broad way". No.

When the united front tactic began to be discussed, for example, in the Communist International, it was said that it was a tactic that applied mainly in the offensive situation of the working class. To unify the working class in order to fight for power it is necessary to have a broader unity.

I think it can be said that the united front tactic can be more easily applied when the class struggle is more acute. Not necessarily more acute in the sense that the working class would be more on the defensive or on the offensive. It is the sharpening of the class struggle that is the motivation that most drives the unity of the working class, the exploited and the oppressed against the bourgeoisie.

Another important issue is that this division between defensive and offensive situations is a division that often makes little sense. Suppose we are in a defensive situation, and we are going to defend ourselves against a very strong threat, as was the case in 2019 with the pension reform. If we are going to fight against this reform – for good, unfortunately we have not managed to do so – we assume that we can defeat this reform. Well, if we had defeated this reform, there would have been a terrible crisis of the government and liberal alliances with the government. Immediately, the situation that was defensive, would have become more offensive.

So, this question of trying to dose the degree of radicalism or ambition for what we are going to defend in a certain way of measuring whether the conjuncture is more offensive or defensive, it is something very artificial. We must assess what we are going to defend fundamentally from the criterion of what is necessary to avoid setbacks, to avoid greater defeats from the point of view of the working class and the exploited and oppressed, and to be able to obtain advances.

So, it's not because the situation is difficult. We saw that it was difficult to the point that we lost against the pension reform, but we were not going to support an intermediate formulation because the balance of power was bad. This is not how we should do politics if we have a perspective of real, revolutionary, transformation of society. We must defend what is necessary to defend.

Of course, we must take into account the economic situation. I am not saying that we should not take into account the economic situation. It has to be done. But we must be careful not to make very mechanical distinctions between defensive and offensive situations, to say whether a tactic is good or not. We must go further.

The united front and elections

Finally, I would like to talk about another point: the united front and elections. The united front tactic, as initially formulated in the Communist International and in the tradition of revolutionary Marxism, is fundamentally a tactic for mass struggle, for action, for strikes, for mobilizations.

One of the important arguments that we see, for example, in the texts of the theses on the united front that have

been adopted by the Communist International, is that in the mass struggle the terrain is naturally more favourable for revolutionaries than for reformists, it is easier to achieve unity and succeed in advancing the class consciousness of the exploited and oppressed than the opposite.

That's the first thing. There are a lot of people who say, "He talked about unity, the most important thing is electoral unity". No. I even think we can say the opposite: to achieve electoral unity, it is necessary to have first had unity in the struggle on subjects that demonstrate the possibility of having more common perspectives.

On the other hand, in the Marxist revolutionary tradition, possibly, the united front can also apply to elections. But we must be very clear about the fact that to have unity, a good unity, in elections, the conditions are much more restrictive than to have unity, a good unity, in a strike for example.

An election is a debate of programmes, of perspectives for society. So, to have electoral unity, we must have a much broader agreement than to have a strike, where it is enough that there is an agreement on this specific demand of the strike, on the moment when it is correct to strike... You don't have to agree on a whole programmatic perspective to have unity in a strike, or other kinds of mass actions. In an election, to have good unity, there must be the possibility of a substantial programmatic agreement and not a regressive thing.

Transitional programme and transitional demands

I end with something I didn't have time to develop. Something that in the revolutionary tradition has always been linked to the defence of united front tactics is the idea of transitional demands, of a transitional programme. And not a separation – which is typical of reformists, according to the criticism that has been made by revolutionary Marxists – between a minimum programme and a maximum programme: "the minimum programme is done because it is what works, and we leave for later the maximum programme and socialism when the situation has changed". But we're not going to change this situation because we're always defending the minimum programme, right?

So, the idea of a transitional programme was something in the debate of the Communist International, intimately associated with the defence of the united front, that we must defend a programme that starts from the most immediate interests of the exploited and the oppressed but at the same time, if only to be consistent in the defence of these interests, opens bridges to a broader transformation of society.

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