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IC 2013 discussion

The debate on broad parties

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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Draft counter-report to the FI Bureau text [“To continue the debate on broad parties”](#) presented to the March 2013 meeting of the International Committee of the Fourth International, approved by the National Committee, Socialist Action (U.S.) January 23, 2013.

The worst way to debate an important and disputed issue in our movement is to caricature your opponent’s position and then ridicule caricature. Unfortunately, this is the method chosen by the Bureau in the opening paragraphs of its text entitled “To Continue the Debate on Broad Parties.”

Their text reads: “The first debate is clearly identified with the Irish comrades and those of SA, who systematically reject any policy of building broad parties, thinking that we should just stay on the line of building organizations on the programme of the Fourth International.”

Comrades familiar with the debate know that there is no substance to this assertion. Neither SA nor the Irish comrades, in any text or statement, at any time, have counterposed building organizations or sections of the FI based on the FI’s program to building broad parties or broad anti-capitalist parties “or for that matter, any form of working-class party aimed at fighting for the interests of the working class.

What we have repeatedly asserted is that the construction of mass revolutionary socialist parties in every country of the world based on the program of the FI is the indispensable and prime reason for the existence of the FI itself – to advance the cause of world socialist revolution. Mass Leninist parties are the prerequisite instruments for the conquest of power, the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of workers and farmers governments to establish the future socialist order. This is a foundational principle of revolutionary socialist politics. Today it appears to be in serious dispute in our world movement.

The issue of whether revolutionaries should enter or construct broad anti-capitalist parties, labor parties based on the trade unions, or any other political formation based on the working class is a tactical question to be decided based on the situation in every country. In different circumstances, these working-class formations can be either an asset or an obstacle to the education and mobilization of the working class. The major criterion determining whether revolutionary socialists should participate in, build or construct such parties is whether or not it advances the construction of the mass revolutionary socialist party of the Leninist type.

A distinction without a difference

The new Bureau text today seeks to distinguish between two kinds of parties, one overtly reformist, the other vaguely defined as broad anti-capitalist “a party that, according to the Bureau, “places itself from the outset in the perspective of the overthrow of the capitalist system, with an acknowledged revolutionary horizon, even if they do not develop a completed revolutionary strategy and if within them they could bring together political currents of different history and traditions...”

With this distinction the Bureau reminds us that “Everyone understands that there is no impermeable boundary between the two projects.” Indeed the FI’s history over the past decades, as well as the decisions of the past several World Congresses, promotes participation in and building of “the two,” kinds of parties. Today, the Bureau’s focus is on just one.

Socialist Action has never indicated any opposition to FI sections participating in or building either of “the two” – qualified only by us with a clear answer to the question, “Does our participation serve to advance or retard the cause of building the revolutionary socialist party of the FI?”

It should be noted that the Bureau’s “revolutionary horizon” party has too often become the overtly reformist party. Thus, Communist Refoundation, initiated by a “left” split from the Italian CP, became part of a coalition capitalist government; the Brazilian PT came to power in an electoral alliance with a Catholic party of capitalist reaction. Our FI comrades originally and for years described the PT and RC as “their” parties” and were emphatic in their theory and practice that the building of FI parties was subordinate to the building of these now discredited reformist or dissolved parties.

What is at stake in this debate is not whether our sections are encouraged to enter and build this or that party, anti-capitalist (however defined) or reformist (however defined). What is under discussion is whether these new formations are a substitute for the revolutionary party – whether something new in the world has appeared following “the fall of the Berlin Wall,” as the text states, which today fundamentally changes our historic perspective of building what we have fought for and advocated for three-quarters of a century – “the world party of socialist revolution.”

The report at the last World Congress, Role and Tasks of the FI, centered on the proposition that the task of the FI was to build a new International based on parties of the French NPA type. We are and remain in staunch opposition to this perspective. If it becomes the norm for all or most FI sections we are heading toward the demise of the FI.

When this clearly stated orientation was challenged by a significant number of sections during the World Congress debate, the reporter for the Bureau, in his summary remarks, felt compelled to modify this categorical assertion by stating that the NPA was for the French, and other sections could do as they pleased based on the conditions in their own countries. This summary marked an important, but still inadequate retreat that has since proved to be ephemeral.

But the proverbial cat was out of the bag, and especially so when the French LCR dissolved itself – effectively liquidating our strongest party. Today, we are proceeding to evaluate the wisdom of this dissolution.

If the question were to be stated more clearly, we must ask, why did the comrades believe that the formation of the NPA made necessary the complete liquidation of the LCR, along with its publications and party institutions? It’s clear that what was involved was not a tactical decision but rather a strategic decision that was based on the fundamentally flawed proposition that world politics had been fundamentally transformed with the demise of the USSR and the other Stalinist states, along with the “social liberal” transformation of the social democracy. From this, it has been all but concluded that the need for the FI and its Leninist sections was now in question. An FI consisting of NPAs was to be the new project – an orientation whose negative consequences are now rapidly unfolding across the board.

Most egregious was the fact that the FI’s objective in these new parties was not to advance the “programme of the FI” and win supporters to it. Had this been the case, our comrades would have organized serious formations – whether they had been called currents, tendencies, platforms, or whatever – for that purpose. But in general, this was not done, much less seen as a priority. In France there is no FI section and no FI current inside the NPA. What remains of the NPA appears to be an ever-growing number of “platforms,” each putting forward its own and counterposed perspective and most each led by FI comrades.

The Bureau is on unstable grounds to speak of a perspective of a “revolutionary break from capitalism” when the very

parties it characterized as being of that nature have embraced capitalist austerity bailouts (as in Portugal) or coalition capitalist budgets (as with the Danish Red Green Alliance). (See IV, SAP national conference statement, "Budget 2013: A major mistake by the Red-Green Alliance.")

Today the Bureau seems to be proposing yet another shift. "Taking stock of the Brazilian and Italian experiences" the Bureau repeats, we now have something else in mind – not broad parties, but broad anti-capitalist parties, "seeking to consolidate all currents rejecting the logic of management of the capitalist system and acting explicitly for a socialist break, a revolutionary rupture based on the activity of social movements."

Here we note that the "language" of revolution has been added to the mix of what these new anti-capitalist parties are to be, if they come into existence, that is, explicitly "socialist" and for a "revolutionary rupture" with the capitalist state. Our estimation is that given the class-collaborationist politics of past and present "anti-capitalist" parties, the Bureau feels the need to take some distance from the parties that it previously praised.

Let us assume that such "currents" could come together to form what the Bureau calls "useful parties," parties that can "organize the class struggle" instead of what the Bureau describes as "small propaganda groups," namely the sections of the FI. Were this the case we would certainly be the first to participate, wholeheartedly, BUT NEVER as a substitute for building and transforming the small, largely propaganda groups that FI sections are today into mass revolutionary socialist parties capable organizing the revolutionary transformation of society. Vaguely defined anti-capitalism and socialism, including a vague reference to a future break with the state power, are no substitute for disciplined revolutionary socialist parties armed with a program for socialist revolution.

FI sections are not small propaganda groups by choice. History has dealt us a hand that we cannot reverse by magical formulas as the Bureau proposes. Our admitted difficulties stem not from inherent programmatic deficiencies and Leninist democratic centralist norms but from the long, perhaps longest period of relative capitalist stability ever. As with Lenin's party, in periods of such stability and/or working-class defeats and retreat, prospects for transforming "small propaganda parties" into mass revolutionary parties are difficult, if not impossible. This is qualitatively different for reformist parties that have a stake in the capitalist system and which are often called on to help "manage" it.

No serious revolutionary party enjoys being compelled by circumstances beyond its control to be relegated to a small propaganda group lacking broad influence in the working class and oppressed. But every revolutionary has faced this unavoidable dilemma, from Marx and Engels to Lenin and Trotsky, and all others, everywhere. How to continue to exist, to fight, to grow, to gain significant influence, to prepare for the future when the mass forces for change in the broad working class remain relatively passive, is the question of questions.

But we are not without instruction. The method of the united front has proven invaluable for major sections of the Fourth International in uniting major currents of the left, and often in the broader workers movement, in common struggle. It is an essential tactic in the transformative process of advancing the class struggle and winning at first small numbers of dedicated cadre and then broad forces to the revolutionary party – and it is properly stressed as such in the Bureau text.

In its essence the tactic of the united front is aimed at achieving two objectives – (1) the mobilization of our class to fight in its own interests, thereby increasing its confidence, power and capacity to win, and (2) distinguishing ourselves in the process from those currents who stand aside from such struggles for sectarian or reformist reasons. Of course, to the extent that other currents in the socialist left join with us in common action and democratic planning, important differences are less magnified, while trust and confidence is advanced that can lay the basis for future collaboration and eventually principled fusions.

The debate on broad parties

We must stress that the central purpose of the united front tactic is to build the revolutionary socialist party. History has tragically and repeatedly demonstrated that the absence of such a party and the leadership it has forged in struggle, guarantees defeats of major proportions. We need not review its consequences in the Arab Spring, in Syria, Libya, Egypt and, indeed, throughout the modern era. The united front tactic, as with all others, is not without its limitations. It is not a magic formula, especially today when the world capitalist system is in a crisis of historic proportions and the important but still limited struggles have yet to score, with few exceptions, significant victories. Such victories, that we are confident will emerge from the present crisis and the fight against it, will lay the basis for deeper and united front mobilizations that open the door wider to the revolutionary transformation of the state. Need we repeat these are highly improbably without a deeply rooted mass revolutionary party with that single-minded objective?

Having recognized the “problematic” of so-called anti-capitalist parties too often subordinating united front mobilizations to electoral politics, the Bureau is compelled to remind us that the direct engagement of the masses in action in the streets remains essential. Nevertheless, immediately following this section, the Bureau reaffirms its major “strategic” objective: “At the same time, the experiences of the last ten years make it necessary to maintain the problematic of the last Congress of building broad anti-capitalist parties.” These “useful” parties have more often than not been more electoral/parliamentary in nature than parties aimed at mass mobilizations to exercise working class power in the streets, hence the Bureau’s need to essentially caution comrades against electoralism.

In recent years the FI majority leadership has rushed headlong toward the subordination, if not substitution, of building Leninist parties to vaguely defined parties with electoralist illusions — including some that violate our principles of class independence. If this project is carried much further, it will necessarily mean the abandonment of our historic program. Tragically, if we were to draw a balance sheet of our experiences with such formations, not only in the past “ten years” as the Bureau states, but for decades before, we would be compelled to come to largely negative conclusions. Many of these groupings have already faced dissolution or are in rapid decline.

Were we discussing a mere tactic regarding a combination of electoral and united front mobilizations to advance the class struggle, a tactic centered on building disciplined FI sections based on our historic program and that maintained an organizational expression inside and outside any formation that we chose to build and/or enter, we would be on solid ground. The test of time and the measure of the lack of success of these projects, however, warns us that the above is not the case.