FORTY YEARS OF POPULAR FRONT GOVERNMENT

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The following paper of Eric Hobsbawm was originally printed in Marxism Today, the theoretical journal of the Communist Party of Great Britain. The ALR editorial collective thought it should be reprinted here since it deals factually and objectively with questions of socialist strategy which have long been a matter of contention and which are once more coming into prominence. It is hoped that the general questions of strategy raised here may promote a discussion in the pages of ALR. In this connection we draw readers' attention to our special publication on Eurocommunism, now out and selling for one dollar.

Among the numerous anniversaries celebrated this year (1976-ALR) - from Adam Smith to the General Strike - I would like to talk about one which continues to be of practical interest to socialists today.

Forty years ago, in 1936, the first people's front governments were formed in France and Spain; that is to say, coalitions of communists with social-democrats and certain middle-class parties which were not seen as the immediate preliminary to revolution and working class power. Such governments had always before then been condemned by the revolutionary left. They were regarded as typically social-democratic, likely to be dominated, directly or indirectly, by the bourgeoisie and therefore likely to divert the movement from its real task which was to make revolution. The only major exception to this might occur in colonial and semi-colonial countries, where according to the Program of the Communist International (1928) - the dictatorship of the proletariat was not the immediate aim of the communists, but a more or less rapid transition from a bourgeois-democratic to a socialist revolution would have to take place.

Without going into the complex history of earlier communist discussions, let me simply say that people's front or coalition
governments of the kind I have sketched were quite new and shocking in the 1930s, and raised serious debates within the revolutionary movement which have not ceased to this day. Before the war two people's front governments failed. The French never overcame its internal contradictions and the half-heartedness of the Socialists who led it, and faded away in 1938. The Spanish was faced with Franco's rising, and went down in defeat in 1939. But people's front governments, in the form of governments of anti-fascist unity in the war against Hitler were formed during and after the war, if anything on an even broader basis than had been envisaged in the 1930s. In 1946 there were few countries which did not have them. They were the rule in the People's Democracies (which were so-called precisely because they were not then supposed to be exclusively communist governments), and in the West there were Communist ministers in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy and Norway until they were expelled or resigned with the coming of the Cold War. In the colonial and semi-colonial countries governments of a broad anti-imperialist front were, of course, also common and less controversial.

For several years after 1947 people's front governments - outside the areas of colonial liberation - were neither practicable nor encouraged, but in the 1960s and 1970s there has been a return to this type of perspective, notably in Italy, France and Spain. At this moment the possible entry of the Italian CP into the government is the major issue in Italian politics. So the issues raised by such governments are not merely historical, but belong to practical politics.

Revolutionary Perspectives after World War I

The international communist movement was founded on the assumption that a world revolution, or at least a revolution in important regions of the world, was both practicable and imminent. That revolution would not necessarily take the Russian form, but nevertheless the October Revolution was in a profound sense the model both of what ought to and would happen, and of the strategy, tactics and organisation for making it happen. This is why the new Communist International insisted on the most rigid and exclusive conditions for joining it. It wanted an effective world party of revolutionaries. It obviously wanted to exclude from this movement and its national sections the rightwing Social-Democrats who had betrayed proletarian internationalism in 1914, and revealed themselves as deeply committed to capitalist society or even - as in Germany - as its main saviours. However, it also wanted to exclude anyone even partly committed to the non-bolshevik way, anyone unwilling to break with social-democratic tradition and organisation in the most total and public manner.

In the excitement of the moment there were, after 1918, plenty of people and parties willing to declare themselves communists or even, carried away by the mood of global revolution or the radicalisation of the masses, to affiliate with the Communist International. What the International wanted, however, was not an influx of the miscellaneous left, but an international bolshevik party. It thus deliberately rejected most of those wanting to join it, leaving the quite important group of leftwing socialist parties - or at least those unwilling to make the total break - to float vaguely in the space between social-democracy and the Comintern. Several of them tried briefly to organise themselves into the so-called "Two-and-a Half International" or Vienna Union before drifting back to social-democracy after 1922, for want of anywhere else to go.

This approach made sense only on the assumption that the Russian revolution would soon be followed by other revolutions, or that an international revolutionary crisis offering similar perspectives would very soon recur. In 1918-20 this seemed a perfectly realistic assessment. It is quite unhistorical to blame Lenin, in the light of hindsight, for setting up an International on the basis of splitting the old international movement - or what remained of it - on the narrowest and most exclusive basis. The situation looked, and was, revolutionary. In such a situation the masses would follow the most consistent revolutionaries. The vital thing was to see that these were consistently and effectively revolutionary, rather than to convert a larger percentage of the old non-bolshevik socialist parties into communist ones at the cost of
compromise.

Exploring Alternative Strategies

Hardly had the Comintern established itself effectively when it became clear that its original hopes would not be realised. From the early 1920s it had to operate in a non-revolutionary situation, at least in most of Europe, though in much of the colonial, semi-colonial and dependent world a revolutionary situation could be said to exist, or to be probable, or even imminent. However, at this stage the great majority of Marxists did not regard the colonial revolution as the immediate forerunners of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and socialist construction. As the program of the Communist International put it in 1928:

"as a rule, transition to the dictatorship of the proletariat in these countries will be possible only through a series of preparatory stages, as the outcome of a whole period of transformation of bourgeois-democratic revolution into socialist revolution".

We need not here discuss the debates, mainly centred on the Chinese Revolution, which were eventually to lead to a different view of the political prospects of colonial liberation.

From 1921 the Comintern thus found itself in the difficult situation of having to work out a strategy on the assumption that further October Revolutions were not in fact likely to take place. This was awkward. As Karl Radek put it at its Fourth Congress (1922): "It is particularly difficult in a period when there are no popular revolts to pursue a Communist political policy." It was doubly awkward, since the very principles on which the International had been constructed now made it more difficult to mobilise, and cooperate with, those large sectors of the movement which it had been designed to exclude. The Comintern found itself in a position rather like an army equipped for offensive, breakthrough and pursuit, which suddenly and unexpectedly finds itself obliged to settle down to a lengthy siege.

To do it credit - and the Communist International receives little enough credit nowadays - it set about seriously rethinking its European strategy almost immediately, with the launching of the United Front policy in 1921. However, the discussions about the new strategy and the new perspectives were confused by four important factors. First and foremost, the hope of a European - or at least a German - October were not abandoned but only postponed; at first briefly, but after the failure of insurrection in Germany in 1923, for a longer period - perhaps until the next capitalist crisis. Alternative strategies were therefore still largely seen as something designed to fill in time until a new revolutionary crisis made a new and better-prepared October possible.

Second, opinion within the new Communist parties was divided and, on the whole, unenthusiastic. Those who had joined them had done so precisely because they wanted revolution and a total break with the old social-democratic tradition. They were ready to follow the line, but left to themselves, most of them sympathised with what was increasingly clearly a sectarian position. This was very clear in the German Communist Party.

Third, the divisions and arguments within communist parties were unfortunately but necessarily entangled with the internal struggles and debates within the Soviet party in the 1920s. This was particularly evident in the period 1928-34 when a policy of almost suicidal sectarianism was imposed on the parties from Moscow. That such a policy had some support within the parties is undoubted; but I don't think it would have established itself in, for example, the British Communist Party without Moscow.

Fourth, and more defensibly, the task of turning the new communist parties, so largely composed of former social-democrats, syndicalists or small leftwing sects, into proper Leninist parties, remained. After all, the case for Lenin's type of party (with or without its Stalinist developments or deformations) was not simply that such a party was required to make insurrection. It was required for any form of effective struggle for, and construction of, socialism.

Popular Front Strategy

So, though alternative strategies were explored within the Comintern in the 1920s, and occasionally surfaced, it was not until the 1930s that they were systematically developed. The movement had, vaguely, looked forward to the coming world crisis of capitalism as something which would somehow automatically produce a revolutionary situation. Instead it produced
the most staggering and undeniable debacle, assisted, without any doubt, by the ultra-sectarianism of the Comintern line after 1928.

In early 1933 the entire European perspective of the International lay in ruins. Hitler was in power in the country to which Lenin had once hoped soon to transfer the headquarters of international socialism, and the German CP was in exile, in concentration camps, or a hunted, illegal rump of cadres. Italian fascism felt strong enough actually to let some communists out of jail in an amnesty in 1932. The only other CP in western Europe with major support, the French, had been reduced to 28,000 members and 12 seats in Parliament. It was no longer possible to deny that the failure of the world revolution to occur in 1917-20 had been more than a temporary setback. The defeat of 1928-33 was clearly of more lasting significance, even though for another year or more officially the Comintern maintained that all was well, though with an increasingly strained air. What was more to the point, the movement was not only beaten but pursued. Fascism was advancing on all fronts. Something had to be done, if only to mobilise an effective defence.

It is not necessary here to analyse the way in which the International came to adopt the Popular Front strategy, or the elements in earlier discussions within the communist movement which anticipated it and from which it was developed. We know that it was pioneered in France in 1934, and officially adopted by the International at its Seventh Congress - the first for seven years - in 1935, which totally reversed the former policy of seeing social-democracy as the main enemy. The new line was put forward in two powerful and visibly heartfelt reports by the new General Secretary of the International, George Dimitrov, and his assistant - also new as a spokesman for the International Palmiro Togliatti, or, as he was then known, Ercoli.

The point I wish to make here is that the Popular Front strategy now adopted was more than a temporary defensive tactic, or even a strategy for eventually turning retreat into offensive. It was also a carefully considered strategy of advancing to insurrectionary situations of the type of the October revolution or of other types were not to be expected, though not necessarily impossible. This does not mean that it was bound to succeed. I hope to say something of its limitations and failures later. Anyway, no strategy is bound to succeed, though some are bound to fail. The search for the magic pill, certified by white-coated or red-flagged scientists, and absolutely guaranteed to cure cancer, cholera, rheumatism and the common cold or their political equivalents, belongs to the field of self-delusion and advertisement rather than to the field of politics.

Unity the core

Just to remind ourselves: the core of the Popular Front strategy was unity. It was a set of concentric circles of unity: at its centre the United Front of the working class movement which in turn formed the basis of an even broader anti-fascist People's Front, which in turn provided in the relevant countries the base for a national front of all those determined to resist fascism in the form of the danger from Hitler, Mussolini and the Japanese, and finally - even more loosely - an international front of governments and peoples - including the USSR - against fascism and war. Each of these circles had, as it were, a different degree of unity.

The object of the United Front was the reunification of labor movements split mainly between social-democrats and communists. This was quite clear in the trade union field where the merger of separate socialist and communist (or other) unions into a single comprehensive trade union federation was envisaged - and sometimes, as in France, achieved. Mergers of socialist and communist parties into a single working class party were not seriously envisaged in practice, since the conditions for such unity laid down by Dimitrov amounted to asking social-democratic parties to become communist ones by committing themselves to "the dictatorship of the proletariat in the form of Soviets" and "democratic centralism" of the Bolshevik type. Nevertheless the question of the political reunification of the labor movement, "of a single political mass party of the working class" was formally declared to be urgent, and in the form of a merger of existing
parties rather than of attracting the masses away from social-democracy to the communists.

The People's Fronts and the broader national fronts were to have a rather loose unity - they were in fact alliances - though, in the course of the anti-fascist struggle a more permanent unity came to be envisaged, in the form of People's Democracies or the western governments based on the unity of all anti-fascist resistance forces. The international unity was more ad hoc still; though, once again at the peak of the wartime alliance but this was after the abolition of the Comintern - the Russians envisaged something like its permanent or semi-permanent prolongation into peacetime.

Strategically, the basic principle of the new policy was to:

"find a common language with the broadest masses for the purposes of struggling against the class enemy, to find ways of finally overcoming the isolation of the revolutionary vanguard from the masses of the proletariat and all other toilers, as well as overcoming the fatal isolation of the working class itself from its natural allies in the struggle against the bourgeoisie, against fascism. (Dimitrov.)"

In short, the working class had been defeated because it had allowed itself to be isolated; it would win by isolating its main enemies.

Defensive and Offensive

The novelty of this strategy was to use the same weapons for defensive and offensive purposes. For the People's Front was, from the start, envisaged not simply as a necessary short-term alliance of desperation against an enemy who threatened forces which had nothing in common except the fear of this threat. This might be so, as it were, on the extreme outskirts of anti-fascist unity. Thus the British Communist Party shocked its allies in 1938 by proposing to extend its support to Churchill, just as Churchill in 1941 shocked his supporters by unhesitatingly extending it to Stalin - both on the same grounds, namely that even the devil was a good enough ally against Hitler if her was prepared to fight him. However, governments of the anti-fascist people's front, based on working class unity, which were the logical outcome of the policy, were from the outset also envisaged as possible elements in the transition from capitalism to socialism. The Comintern was extremely cautious and qualified in its formulations of this question, but clear enough to state that: "It may be that in a number of countries the united front government will prove to be one of the most important transitional forms". More generally, it was clearly stated that the fight against fascism was the main way forward in the struggle for socialism. To defeat it would also be to strike a major blow at capitalism.

The arguments for this, though not often stated with great clarity in public, were as follows. Fascism was the logical expression of monopoly capitalism, which had reduced the effective control of the economy to a handful of ultra-powerful corporations or groups - the "two hundred families", as the French put it. These crucial groups of concentrated capitalist power, in a period of revolution and intensifying class struggle, saw their main salvation in fascism at home and abroad. As the French reactionaries put it frankly, when faced with a Popular Front government in their own country: "Better Hitler than Leon Blum". In fact, the bulk of French big business took the logical step of collaborating with the Germans, and much of private industry after the war was expropriated, not on the grounds that it had so collaborated, e.g. the Renault works. Under these circumstances the call for anti-fascist struggle was in effect also the call for struggle against the most powerful, dangerous and decisive sectors of monopoly capital. It was not a struggle against the bourgeoisie as such, but, as Manuilsky argued in his survey of the Congress (nprecorr 1935, p. 1, 696): "Whilst we are undermining the power of these elements, we are at the same time undermining the power of the bourgeoisie as a whole because .... (it) is indissolubly connected with the most reactionary, most chauvinist and most imperialist elements of finance capital."

This was excessively optimistic, for two reasons. First, because not all bourgeoisie, and not even all groups of monopoly capitalists, joined the fascists and thus made themselves vulnerable to attack on this ground. The Americans and the British, for one, eventually fought fascism. Second, and more seriously, because it assumed that fascism was a lasting phase of capitalist development, that bourgeois democracy was
permanently abandoned as no longer compatible with liberal democracy, so that the defence of liberal democracy became objectively anti-capitalist. In the 1930s this was not implausible. Most of us believed it. But, as it turned out, fascism was a temporary and regional phase of world capitalism, and after 1945 it returned to a modified and bureaucratised version of liberal democracy.

**Period of Anti-fascist Unity**

However, in the 1930s and 1940s the front line between fascism and anti-fascism was indeed that of the class struggle, and the popular front strategy enabled the left to fight it with the maximum number of allies, all the more so as it was evidently defending itself, its allies, and its nations, against fascist attack. What is more, insofar as this defence was necessarily armed - as in Spain and later in World War II - it turned into a revolutionary struggle in which the communists were able to increase their influence, sometimes decisively, by virtue of their obvious effectiveness and leadership. Let us not forget that the period of the strategy of anti-fascist unity eventually led not only to something that had been hardly conceivable in Western Europe, namely armed guerrilla warfare - on a much larger scale than anything in, say, Latin America, since the war - but also, and more important, to the extension of socialist power to large parts of Eastern Europe. Much of this was due to the Red Army, but by no means all. Yugoslavia, Albania, probably in a large degree Bulgaria and - until suppressed by a British intervention - Greece, were genuinely home-grown liberation movements.

Moreover, from the narrower point of view of the success of communist parties, the period of anti-fascist unity was as brilliantly successful as the 1920s had been disappointing. There was no communist party, however insignificant, which did not gain relatively enormous ground. I have mentioned the disastrous situation of these parties in 1933. Twelve years later, at the end of the war, the European parties were at their all-time peak, except for the German one which (in West Germany) never recovered from Hitler, and the Spanish which shared the defeat of the Republic by Franco.

In France and Italy the party was, or was on the way to becoming, the majority party of the working class for the first time. Even in countries where it had never established any support comparable to that of the socialists, its vote rose dramatically: 13 per cent in Belgium (or more than double its best previous performance), 12.5 per cent in Denmark (or more than five times its previous best), 23.5 per cent in Finland (or almost double its previous best), 10 per cent in Holland (or about three times its previous best), 12 per cent in Norway (or double its previous best), 10 per cent in Sweden (or almost double). Even in Britain, you may recall, the two communist MPs elected in 1945 mark the high point of the party's modest electoral achievement.

In one sense the period of anti-fascist unity was therefore an undoubted success. It reversed the global trend towards fascism, defeated fascism, and furthermore got the communist parties out of their sectarian isolation. If the French and Italian Communist Parties have replaced the socialist party as the major party of the working class in their countries, it was due to the experiences of the anti-fascist period. On the other hand, the possible contribution of people's front governments to a transition to socialism is much more debatable.

**Debate in the International Movement**

There was indeed a deep, if not always acknowledged, division on this question within the communist movement. The USSR was primarily interested in its own security - mainly against German aggression - and in diplomatic alliances to safeguard it. I think it is safe to say that it was seriously interested in people's fronts out of their sectarian isolation. If the French and Italian Communist Parties have replaced the socialist party as the major party of the working class in their countries, it was due to the experiences of the anti-fascist period. On the other hand, the possible contribution of people's front governments to a transition to socialism is much more debatable.
Convinced - it should simply, as it were, "get the golf-ball of revolution out of the bunker into which it had got itself by 1933, after which the game would go on as before. The people's front was at best an educational device by means of which non-communist workers could learn that revolution was the only way. In fact, the people's front slogan led to an enormous revitalisation and strengthening of the left, both in France and Spain. The victory of people's front governments produced a spontaneous radicalisation in the masses in both countries, which - some people argue - ought to have been used to make a bid for power in France, and which actually produced a social revolution in Spain, when Franco made his insurrection. I do not want to discuss the criticisms of communist policy which have been made about these episodes, beyond saying that I do not believe there was a revolutionary situation in France in 1936, and that in Spain the need to defeat Franco inevitably dominated the policy of the people's front government.

Policy of the Long Haul

But within the Comintern there was another perspective, though it was only hinted at, because those who had previously put forward such views had been damned or expelled as rightwing deviationists, e.g. George Lukacs, who was forced out of politics and into literary criticism for this reason, between 1928 and 1956. Antonio Gramsci (whose friend Togliatti was now one of the chief spokesmen of the International) had elaborated a policy based on the assumption that the lost opportunity of 1917-20 would not recur, and that communist parties must envisage not a short frontal offensive but a lengthy war of position - a policy of the long haul. In effect, they must win the leadership of a broad alliance of social forces, and maintain this leadership during a prolonged period of transition, in which the actual transfer of power was only one episode.

In the west communists were not confronted with a state which had only to collapse for the working class to seize power. The state was only the first line of the bourgeoisie's defence. Behind it there was a whole system of bunkers and fortresses - the institutions of civil society which established the legitimacy of bourgeois rule. Again, unlike the East - I quote Karl Radek (1922) "in the West the working masses are not so amorphous .... They are members of parties and they stick to their parties. In the East, in Russia, it was easier to bring them into the fold of communism after the outbreak of the revolutionary storm. In your countries it is much more difficult." Or, as Dimitrov put it in 1935:

"It is a common mistake of a leftist character to imagine that, as soon as a political (or revolutionary) crisis arises, it is enough for the Communist leaders to throw out the slogan of revolutionary insurrection, and the masses will follow."

The struggle for hegemony over a long period implied two things: that even in the west the slogan of an immediate transition to the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was correct only in exceptional circumstances, and second, that it was wrong for the communists to refuse to take any interest in government until after they had made their own revolution. On the contrary, the more they did so, the more they left hegemony in the hands of the bourgeoisie, and condemned themselves to subalternity.

Now insofar as the people's front governments were seen as possible regimes of transition to socialism, they therefore implied that the dictatorship of the proletariat was not the immediate program of the communists, and that there would be an intermediate phase between the rule of the bourgeoisie and socialism. (I am not here discussing the meaning of the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' which has now such associations that many western communist parties are abandoning it.) But as I have tried to show above, there was a major weakness in this analysis. It made sense on the assumption that capitalism was fatally weakened by the defeat of fascism. As we have seen, this was not so. After the war it still made sense - though a bit less - on the assumption that capitalism would not recover. But as we know, it did. It made sense on the assumption that the people's front government was decisively tilted to the left, so that it could not drift back into being a bourgeois coalition with a socialist or communist appendix. But, outside Eastern Europe after the war, this was not so. On the contrary, the governments of anti-fascist unity in western Europe could get rid of their communists whenever they wished and in
any case kept them in subordinate positions where they took the blame for unpopular government policies - e.g. as ministers of labor.

It is true that in Eastern Europe after the war - 1945-47 - there were genuine alliance governments, and not merely communist regimes in fancy dress, although the left wing in the communist movement led at the time by the Yugoslavs regarded this as undesirable. Thus Dimitrov in 1946 said: "Our immediate task is not the realisation of socialism, but the consolidation of the democratic and parliamentary system." 'People's Democracy' then was not yet a synonym for the dictatorship of the communist party, nor was a single way of development patterned on the USSR imposed on the East European states. But with the coming of the cold war this ended, and little was left of the perspective of a gradual transition to socialism in accordance with conditions in each country, except the name 'People's Democracy' which was now meaningless.

Situation in which People's Fronts Arise

The criticisms of people's fronts and broad alliances by the western ultra-left envisages similar development. Such governments are rejected unless they are the immediate precursors of socialist power, i.e. unless they stop being people's fronts and turn themselves into 'dictatorships of the proletariat'. Here the present ultra-left echoes, among other things, the opinions of Lén Trotsky who dismissed the Comintern's policies in the wildest and most sectarian manner, (1) though he had earlier made some very sound criticisms of the Comintern's disastrous sectarianism before 1934. Trotsky and other ultra-radicals at the time rejected the very idea of the broad anti-fascist alliance, and when it became clear that it stimulated a striking revival and growth of the movement, rejected it for not immediately proceeding to make a classical revolution. Recent ultra-leftist attitudes towards Chile have been along the same lines.

This was and is to misunderstand the situation in which people's fronts arise. Broad alliances of groups and parties, including people's fronts, are necessary only when the working class party is not strong enough to win on its own: it rarely is. But when such alliances or fronts are necessary, they therefore consist of a variety of groups and organisations with very different opinions, some of them not even socialist. They are united only against a common enemy, or for a common program which represents only the first step for some participants, whereas for others it marks the furthest point to which they are at the moment prepared to go. This follows from the fact that they are neither socially nor politically homogenous. In short, if they are to be more than brief political interludes, the socialists within such alliances must convince and carry along their allies, or at least neutralise them. If they fail to do so, they simply revert to being a relatively impotent minority group. Indeed, they might even be worse off, if their policy had antagonised formerly allied, neutral or indifferent strata, allowing these to be mobilised by the class enemy.

Some Criticisms

The Italian Communist leader Berlinguer has quite rightly pointed out that this is so in countries such as ours, whether there are people's fronts or not. Even if the Italian CP were to get 51 per cent of the votes - or even a lot more - and establish a pure CP government, it would still have to carry most of the other 49 per cent with it. The Italian analysis of the tragic Chilean experience is that Allende failed not simply because his Popular Unity was unable technically to defeat the military, but because it alienated large sectors of the population which it ought to have carried with it, or at least not allowed or stimulated to become bitterly antagonistic. It thus isolated itself at the very moment of danger, and provided the military plotters with both an excuse for their coup and at least a temporary mass base of social support for it. In short, socialists must not allow themselves to forget strategy and politics - isolating the adversary, winning friends and influencing people - by falling into the trap of arithmetic - whether in the social-democratic manner by counting votes, or the ultra-radical manner by counting guns. Which is not to say that either can be neglected.

Furthermore, the problem of winning political support does not disappear even when the revolutionaries are actually in
effective possession of power. Portugal is a sad example of a country in which they lost a historic opportunity, partly by relying too exclusively on the backing of a military state power whose revolutionary maturity and homogeneity they overestimated, partly by the old leftist error of supposing that even in a revolutionary situation all the masses will automatically rally to the revolutionary slogans. They neglected the real distribution of political forces in their country - the fact that the workers and landless peasants were only a minority, the church's influence, and the ease with which the small and middle peasants of the North could be mobilised by anti-communist slogans.

This is not to say that people's front governments ought not to be criticised. They may not try to advance towards socialism at all, and therefore be no more than ordinary temporary coalitions. I think the French Popular Front of 1936 is open to this criticism. They may rely too much on being, as it were, carried in the right direction by inevitable historical forces. As suggested above, this was the weakness of the argument that the defeat of fascism must entail the decline of capitalism, or that capitalism after the war would not be able to recover its initiative and dynamism. This meant that communists who entered such governments did not do enough to change the political structures of their countries. For instance, it may be argued that the Italian Communist Party in 1945, when it had the weight of anti-fascist insurrection behind it, neglected to destroy the structure of the old fascist bureaucracy and the political power of the Church, relying too much on a new and admittedly very progressive Constitution which they helped to draft. Again, people's fronts may be criticised for failing to appreciate the very serious problems of transforming heterogeneous and mutually suspicious coalitions or electoral alliances into effective reforming governments. This criticism can certainly be made of the Chilean Popular Unity. They may finally sometimes be criticised for not sufficiently appreciating the basic fact that governments which go too far for the ruling class may be overthrown by it, or its allies, or its foreign supporters.

The Strategy which Reaction Fears

Still, when all these criticisms have been made the people's fronts remain to this day the socialist strategy which most frightens the enemy. They are not scared of barricades going up in Milan or Paris. On the other hand, they have always regarded unity as the main danger. Why did the Americans spend so much energy and money in the 1950s splitting the national and international trade union movements and any progressive or socialist party (such as the Italian) willing to co-operate with communists? Why did ideologists invent the myth that nobody could ever co-operate with communists without being swallowed by them - unless to discourage such cooperation? (2) Why that other myth, according to which no people has ever freely voted a red government into office? Why, only this spring, did the US government order its ambassador to warn every European socialist party against having anything to do with communists? Why do Ford and Kissinger repeat daily that the entry of communists into any government, especially the Italian, is intolerable? Why is the Spanish government planning to legalise all parties except the Communist Party? Because they are afraid of the strategy of the broad alliance. They would much prefer the revolutionaries to isolate themselves, the more sectarian in spirit, the better. They know that in most countries where socialism has come, it has been brought about by broad fronts led by communists - whether in the form of people's fronts or not - rather than through the isolated action of revolutionary marxists. No war of liberation could have been won on any other terms.

It is sometimes a good thing to remind ourselves of what the enemy fears most. Today, in spite of two generations of criticism from the left, what he fears most - especially in the developed countries of Europe - is still the sort of strategy first systematically adopted by the international communist movement in the 1930s.

(1) He actually seems to have believed that people's fronts "doom the working class to impotence and clear the road for fascism" (my emphasis - E.J.H.)

(2) In fact, such alliances have as often as not benefited the non-communists who got rid of the communists when they had served their purpose. Communists have never regarded this as a reason for condemning all alliances on principle.