



The Affiliation Tactic

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The political flux to which revolutionaries attempt to relate via the Labor Party tactic, exists not only during the period before the creation of such a party.

It can continue, or develop, thereafter, as the conflicting programmes and tendencies within the working class clash over how the party should be built and upon what programme. This was recognised by Trotsky in 1932 when he wrote:

"It is evident that the possibility of participating in a Labor Party movement and for utilising it would be greater in the period of its inception, that is, in the period when the party is not a party but an amorphous political mass movement. That we must participate in it at that time and with the greatest energy is without question; not to help form a Labor Party which will exclude us and fight against us, but to push the progressive elements of the movement more and more to the left by our activity and propaganda."

In the early 1920s the young Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was able to put this tactic into practice with regard to the Labour Party (LP). The LP was not created as a centralised party but as a federation of affiliated organisations including both the trade unions and political organisations such as the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the Social Democratic Federation (briefly) and the Fabians. The federative principle effectively prevented democratic control of the leadership by the masses who supported the party and ensured the ideological formlessness which best allowed the reformists to continue their collaborationist practice.

However it also allowed the affiliation, during 1916, of the British Socialist Party (BSP), the successor to the Social Democratic Federation and the most significant grouping of "Marxists" in Britain.

When the BSP took part in the formation of the CPGB in 1920, therefore, the question of its continued membership of the LP was posed. In contrast to those who wished quietly to renew their membership of the LP as if nothing had happened and those who wished to demonstratively split from the LP, Lenin was in favour of the attempt by the CP itself to affiliate to the Party.

He proposed this in order that the Communists could put themselves in a position to relate directly to the many rank and file workers who were joining the LP as a consequence of its decision to allow individual membership after 1918. The affiliation tactic, therefore, was designed to put to the test the claim of the Labour Party to be the party of the entire working class at a time when the bureaucracy's control of the party had not gelled and the character of that party had not yet been revealed to millions of workers by the experience of government.

Lenin pointed out that the operation of the tactic would imply minimal concessions from the communists while: ". . . this party permits organisations affiliated to it to enjoy the present freedom of criticism and freedom of propagandist, agitational and organisational activity for the dictatorship of the proletariat, as long as that party presents its character as a federation of all trade union organisations of the working class."

Such compromises or concessions mainly with regard to electoral questions, should be made by communists in order to allow them: "The opportunity of influencing the broadest mass of workers, of exposing the opportunist leaders from a platform that is higher and more visible to the masses, and of accelerating the transition of political power from the direct agents of the bourgeoisie to the 'labour lieutenants' of the capitalist class in order that the masses may be more quickly weaned from their best illusions on thing score."

The request for Communist Party affiliation, made in August 1920, was rejected by the reformist leaders of the Labour Party. Nonetheless, on the basis of its members who were individual members of the Labour Party already, or were delegated to LP bodies from their affiliated trade unions, the CPGB continued, until 1928, not only to work within the LP but to continue to campaign for its right to affiliate. In the Labour Party after the rejection of affiliation, and in other reformist parties as a matter of course, the parties of the Comintern in its revolutionary period, undertook systematic fraction work.

In the course of 1920 the KPD fraction within the German USPD fought, with great success, for that party to accept the conditions of membership of the Comintern and purge itself of its reformist and centrist leaders. Such fraction work is not designed, however, to facilitate a strategic transformation of the parties within which it is undertaken. The effect of the KPD's work was several hundred thousand members breaking away to join the Communist Party.

The continued fight for affiliation in the LP was also the result of disciplined and co-ordinated activity by communist members of the LP. In his advice to them Lenin made perfectly clear that by raising revolutionary politics they would be liable to expulsion but they should not shrink from this, since in the struggle over their membership it would be the reformists who were exposed as the dividers of the forces willing to fight the bourgeoisie:

"Let Messrs Thomas and the other social traitors, whom you call social traitors, expel you. This will have an excellent effect upon the mass of the British workers."

Indeed: "If the BCP starts out by acting in a revolutionary manner in the Labour Party and if Messrs Henderson are obliged to expel this party, it will be a great victory for the communist and Labour movement in England."

The potential that such a situation could develop was clearly shown by the experience within the British Labour Party even after affiliation had been rejected. The proposal itself was re-submitted at annual conferences and created continuing opportunities for the communists to win over fellow members of the LP, at least to their right to recognition as a component of the labour movement. In 1923, for example, they gained 200,000 votes although the resolution for affiliation was defeated by three million.

The reformist leaders were not satisfied by this, and through the 1920s they were successful in progressively removing communists' rights within the party.

In 1924 they were denied the right to stand as Labour Party candidates. The following year they were banned as individual members of the party and in 1926 were declared ineligible as delegates to conference even if delegated from trade union bodies. These measures provoked serious opposition within the party.

Over 100 constituency parties refused to implement the 1925 decision. The tactic of the Communist Party was to try to build an alliance with left reformists and centrists to prevent expulsions and other measures. Some 50 local Labour Parties associated themselves with this National Left Wing Movement. Although the attempt to form this alliance was correct, the politics of the CPGB within it bore no resemblance to the principled approach outlined by Lenin.

As part of its rightist turn from 1925-8, the CP dropped its emphasis on its own political independence and supported the National Left Wing Movement's declared intention not to supersede the Labour Party but to, "remould it nearer to the heart's desire of the rank and file."

Far from forcing the lefts and centrists to make genuine moves to the left through sharp criticism of such confused declarations, the CP launched a weekly newspaper, the Sunday Worker in which their allies were free to give expression to their centrist politics without a word of criticism from the Communists. The National Left Wing Movement became a non-aggression pact as the Communist Party desperately attempted to maintain the alliance in the face of their "left" allies' retreats and betrayals.

After the defeat of the 1926 General Strike, the "lefts" did not raise a finger to obstruct the renewed offensive by the right wing either in the Labour Party or in the unions. The freedom of propaganda, which Lenin had cited as the prime

condition on which affiliation was possible, no longer existed. The correct response of the Communist Party should have been to make the sharpest criticism of the splitting manoeuvres of the leaders and to fight for the supposed "lefts" and the many workers who were under their influence, to join the Communist Party as had been done in Germany.

Instead, under the guidance of the Stalinist Comintern, which had directed the rightist course previously, they now lurched violently to the left. The ultra-left politics of "Third Period" Stalinism led the CP to declare the Labour Party to be a "social fascist" party. Accordingly, they wound up both the National Left Wing Movement and the Sunday Worker.

The fundamental principles which should guide communist fraction work in reformist parties were clarified by the Left Opposition's criticisms of the Stalinists' errors and were developed by Trotskyists in the 1930s as they strove to deepen their roots within the working class. Thus in 1938 the SWP in discussing its work within the Stalinist American Communist Party, adopted the following resolution:

"At the present stage of development we do not, as a policy, withdraw adherents of the FI in the CP from that party as individuals but rather strive to a) get these adherents (under our discipline) into strategic positions with the object of obtaining information and attaining influence; b) organise a national fraction with the perspective of a national split to be executed at some propitious time. When our fraction is strong enough we issue a regular national paper of this fraction for the YCL and the CP as a Leninist organ in the communist movement."

The purpose of such fraction work is to enable communists to fight for their programme in the heart of the mass working class organisations which are dominated by reformists or centrists. It requires united front tactics inasmuch as it attempts to fight alongside those workers who accept reformist or centrist leadership of their party but are necessarily confronted with the need to wage the class struggle.

By raising demands on such leaders and by attempting to mobilise the rank and file independently of them, communists seek to break the masses from their leaders through direct experience of the repression, sabotage and vacillations of those leaders. Central to the success of the tactic is the maintenance of the political independence of the communist fraction.

If that is forfeited, then even should the workers become disillusioned with their leaders they will have no clear alternative to turn to. As with all applications of the united front, this tactic holds dangers, particularly for disorientated or inexperienced cadres. The danger of opportunism flows from the temptation to accommodate to the politics of the "host" party by watering down the programme of the Communist Party. An unwillingness to take part in limited struggles for partial, non-revolutionary objectives and the counterposing of the revolutionary programme when the workers have not yet been won to it leads to the opposite danger of sectarianism. In all cases the role of the fraction as a subordinate element under the discipline of the revolutionary party which exists as an independent party outside the reformist party, has to be maintained.

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