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It was Lenin who really conceptualized the idea of united front. Though it is found in Marx-Engels, united front as a concept emerged in full form in the imperialist era. Lenin was the founder of the concept of imperialism, and therefore naturally of united front.

Lenin defined the Russian revolution as the first major revolutionary product of the imperialist age. In his extraordinary theoretical breakthrough, he discovered imperialism as a higher stage of capitalism. His theoretical studies found in Russia the weakest link of world imperialism; consequently, as a scientific practitioner he led the successful revolution in Russia. His practice flowed directly from scientific theory and methodology. Without understanding this we cannot understand the nature of the Russian revolution.

The transformation of capitalism into imperialism towards the end of the 19th century posed new problems for the international working class movement. Strategy, tactics, forms of struggle, allies and opponents, stages of revolution etc. were to be reworked. Several basic questions of Marxism had to be answered anew.

United Front during Democratic Revolution

Imperialism means alienation and exploitation of a greater number of classes and sections. The sphere of suffering is widened. It is increased exploitation by a small group of giant exploiters. Those who suffer include even sections of the bourgeoisie, small producers and traders, besides the workers, peasants, petty bourgeoisie and middle classes.

This phenomenon constitutes the objective basis for a wider democratic front. In other words, the front of victims of oppression/exploitation is far wider than in the earlier phases of capitalism. It was Lenin who theorized the new features, drawing necessary conclusions.

Unfortunately, many others could not grasp the changes in capitalism and continued to stick to old concepts. They were led to wrong conclusions, both sectarian and reformist.

It is interesting to follow the theoretical debates Lenin had with the Mensheviks on these questions that boiled down basically to an evaluation of imperialism. Mensheviks and other “revolutionaries” were scandalized by Lenin’s ‘revisionism’ on the democratic revolution, united front and on ‘capitalism’s advocacy’ on his part. They opined that the proletariat had nothing to do with the bourgeois democratic revolution and with the tactics of united front associated with it, that it should not be ‘polluted’ and dissolved in bourgeois democracy, and that revolutionaries maintain their ‘independence’ by remaining as a party of ‘extreme revolutionary opposition’.

Lenin replied that in the imperialist era, one must not remain aloof from broad democratic movements, wherever they occurred. The working class must cooperate with other parties/classes including the bourgeoisie. “The difference between us in this respect is that we march side by side with the revolutionary and republican bourgeoisie, without merging with it, whereas you (Mensheviks—A.R.) march side by side with liberal and monarchist bourgeoisie without merging with it either.” (Lenin in *Two Tactics*)

These celebrated debates took place in the newspapers of the working-class movement in Russia.

In consonance with this strategy, Lenin developed the thesis of *united front* of workers and peasants, mainly during the Russian revolution of 1905 and applied it on a large scale during the 1917 revolution. It should be noted that the Russian revolution was successful not only because of the unity of the workers and peasants but also due to massive participation of the soldiers. Millions of soldiers refused to fight for the Tsar in the later stages of the First World War, and deserted him *en masse*. The state's armed machine collapsed and power passed to the Soviets, the mass united organs of workers, peasants and soldiers.

Marx and Engels had developed rudiments of theory and practice of united front in their times. Lenin developed these further according to the demands of the 20th century.

Revolution and Extension of Worldwide United Front

The October Revolution opened a new era world-wide. The uninterrupted front of imperialism was breached. The worker-peasant state and movements for national freedom and bourgeois democracy became part and parcel of a single worldwide process. The Russian revolution became the rallying point for those struggling for socialism and for democratic capitalist transformation.

Lenin underlined the fact that imperialism not only suppressed the common masses but also capitalism itself. That is why the bourgeoisie participate in the national liberation and democratic movements. After freedom, capitalism has to be built facing obstacles from imperialism, as happened in Turkey and in India after freedom. This point was overlooked by many Communists in the Comintern, and Lenin had to conduct a firm ideological struggle against them.

Imperialism and highly monopolized capital drive huge sections of petty producers, artisans, small peasants and such like out of production and the market. It also tries to drive out non-monopoly capitalism and industry, who face tough competition and exploitation. By monopolizing capital, production and market imperialism makes it difficult for the non-monopoly sections of society to operate. In fact, imperialism, in many senses, destroys or distorts capitalism. That is exactly what happened in Russia, amply described by Lenin in his profound studies.

UF Strategy and Tactics

Imperialism demands broad-based tactics and strategy from Communists, who are nothing if they do not mobilize the widest sections against imperialism.

Debates broke out in the Communist International (Comintern) regarding the tactics of Communists in the West European countries. Newly founded Communist Parties were not just enthusiastic but over-enthusiastic about Soviet power. This led them to mechanically copy the Soviet experience. They began to see revolution everywhere and immediately.

It was to counter these tendencies in the West and the East that Lenin wrote his famous work '*Leftwing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*' (1920). It is one of the most important and lasting works by Lenin on political tactics, united front and the necessity of work in parliament and need for struggle for democracy. According to Lenin, the newly formed CPs were suffering from 'infantile disorder'. This work was an extension of another of his important works, '*Leftwing Childishness*' and '*the Petty-bourgeois Mentality*'.

The ‘diseases’ suffered by revolutionaries and Communists were described by Lenin as follows: refusal to participate in elections; refusal to take part in bourgeois parliament; refusal to any united action with other parties, particularly the bourgeois parties; refusal to seek out allies in the name of keeping ‘independence’; total opposition to any compromise, etc. Because of their narrow, sectarian attitude and over-enthusiasm for the Russian revolution, these parties were unable to take advantage of the favorable situation created precisely by the revolution.

Lenin particularly mentioned a passage from Engels criticizing the Anarchists for striving to avoid all the intermediate stages of revolution, avoiding compromises and refusing to have anything to do with potential allies. “German Communists are Communists because through all the intermediate stations and all compromises created not by them but by the course of historical development, they...pursue the final aim...” Imagining revolution does not bring anybody even a bit nearer it.

Lenin pointed out that compromises with other parties, including the bourgeois parties, were an essential part of the Communists’ tactics. He pointed to so many compromises made by the Bolshevik Party in the course of the revolution. He said compromises helped the party and class to gain strength and weaken the opponent’s effort to divide the movement and break its unity.

Lenin lashed out at the German and British Communists for childishly refusing to participate in the elections and to enter into any electoral adjustments with others. He criticised leaders like William Gallacher for such refusal simply because the parliament was corrupt and to maintain the so-called proletarian ‘purity’. In order to face the conservatives, Lenin called upon the British Communists to fight jointly with and even support bourgeois Labour Party candidates where the CPGB was not fighting. He asked them to even support Henderson against Lloyd George. Lenin said that Russian Bolsheviks found out allies, even if most vacillating and undependable. He said: “Those who do not understand this, reveal a failure to understand even the smallest grain of Marxism...” “Prior to the downfall of Tsardom, the Russian revolutionary social democrats made repeated use of the services of the bourgeois liberals i.e. they concluded numerous practical compromises with the latter.” According to Lenin, the Russian Bolsheviks never refused “to support the bourgeoisie against Tsarism”.

Lenin came out in support of the open letter of the German CP of 1921 addressed to other parties for joint action on common issues, calling it ‘perfectly correct tactics’ and ‘a model political step’. He at the same time condemned the ‘Left’ within the party who had opposed it.

Anti-imperialist, Anti-colonial Front

The Russian revolution caused an upheaval of support in the backward colonial countries. People and leaders came out in its support. It showed that a vast unity against the imperialist system was taking shape and the front was extending.

Lenin took initiative to discuss the colonial theses at the 2nd Congress of the Comintern. At that time the anti-colonial freedom movements were on the rise in India, China and Iran and elsewhere. The question was whether the Communists should participate in them along with other parties and classes, particularly the bourgeoisie. This led to the famous Lenin-Roy controversy.

The Communists of the colonial countries, in particular the ‘Left’-wing within them, had a tendency to overestimate their role and exclude the petty bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie as those who have ‘gone over to

imperialism'. This attitude did immense harm to the communist movement and isolated them in many countries from the national movement. Stalin, after the death of Lenin, revived this thesis in 1925 when he announced that the national bourgeoisie had 'gone over to imperialism'. It weakened the struggle and it took a long time to give up this wrong notion.

Lenin emphasized the need to participate in every bourgeois democratic and national movement 'wherever' they occur, while at the same time maintaining the Communists' independent role. But 'independence' did not mean rejecting the united front. It meant a more active role by the Communists for the broadest unity of the democratic forces against the common opponent.

In this context Lenin developed the concept of bourgeois democratic national fronts to fulfil certain basic tasks. He developed it further in his speech at the Congress of the Peoples of the East. He blasted the Communists of the colonies for trying to restrict the common front at the 4th Comintern Congress (1922): "The refusal of the Communists in the colonies to participate in the struggle against imperialist oppression on the pretext of the alleged 'defense' of independent class interests is opportunism of the worst kind..."

Vast sections of the intelligentsia and common people were attracted to the ideas of the Russian revolution. It was now possible not only to struggle against imperialism but also to carry out democratic transformations. Soviet Russia concluded, at the insistence of Lenin, agreements with Turkey under Kemal Ataturk Pasha to solve territorial disputes and establish active economic cooperation. Thus began state to state cooperation, whose clear reflection was later found in Indo-Soviet cooperation.

The concept of bourgeois democratic front was an original contribution by Lenin to united front theory.

Development of United Front for Democracy

Lenin proved profoundly correct and his theory of united front helped the peoples in the West and the East to struggle unitedly against the chief opponents in the form of fascism, imperialism and monopoly capitalism. Most important, Lenin provided us with a methodology. History showed that the front kept on widening. The Communists grew whenever they followed correct united front tactics. They were then looked upon as the most active unifier of the classes and peoples.

The crisis of world imperialism in the 1920s and 1930s led to the emergence of fascism in the form of Mussolini and Hitler. To meet the threat, Communist leaders like Dimitrov, Togliatti, RPD and others and the Communist Parties of France, Spain, Germany etc. defined fascism and developed the theses of anti-fascist, anti-imperialist united front. Dimitrov was the chief theoretician of united front. It was much broader than that given by Lenin. Fascism could not have been defeated without such a front. In fact, had a front been formed in Germany, Hitler would not have to power in 1932. Unfortunately, the 6th Congress of the Comintern (1928) developed a highly sectarian line and characterized social democrats as social fascists. It underestimated the danger of fascism and the concept divided the anti-fascist forces. It was Dimitrov and other leaders and parties who set the anti-fascist movement on correct rails. In almost all the elections, the combined votes of the German CP (KPD) and SDP were more than that of the Nazi party. Yet, division in the anti-fascist camp brought Hitler to power.

Dimitrov's united front theses (1935) corrected the mistaken notions. His theses are still a guide for democrats and need to be studied thoroughly. Togliatti's lectures on fascism and united front are even today relevant.

Popular Fronts became victorious in elections in 1936 in France and Spain, which helped roll back fascism for the time being.

The struggles in China, Vietnam (Indochina), India, Malaya etc. necessitated developing broad anti-imperialist fronts. At that time the front was generally termed 'people's democratic front'. In China it was also sometimes called the new democratic front and in India the national front.

People's democracy was an advance over the earlier forms of united front in these countries. It exemplified an extension of the front, not its restriction. The movement suffered whenever there were attempts to restrict it, in violation of the Leninist concept.

The post-Second World War (WWII) situation opened up new horizons of mass people's and democratic movement. Gradually by the 1950s-60s, the earlier concept was found to be inadequate. With the broadening of mass democratic movements, the world communist movement in its conferences went further and developed the concept of 'national democracy' and 'national democratic front'. It reflected the more favourable post-WWII situation better.

Today, not only the Communists and the working class but vast sections of non-Communists are advancing slogans and concepts of 'ninety-nine per cent against one per cent'. The worldwide and countrywide united front has become widest till date. Imperialism and fascism can be rolled back if such a broadest kind of democratic front comes into being.

Lenin's scientific investigations into the formation of the united front of common classes, sections and parties against the main opponent in the form of imperialism and fascism proved to be of great foresight and a powerful weapon covering a whole era.