



*HOW CAN
THE LEFT
UNITE?*



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The question that forms the title of this article is perhaps one of the most frequently asked of me and leftist activists. Because I don't want to torture readers with suspense, I'm going to let the cat out of the bag right now and say that YES, the left can unite in direct action, and that common actions pave the way to long term political unity. But questions still remain. Why is the left divided, and how can existing divisions be overcome?

The existing left emerged organically from concrete conditions. To understand those circumstances, some background is needed. This is the 104th year since the triumph of the first successful workers' revolution, the Russian Revolution of 1917. It changed the political landscape globally, and altered the left irrevocably. But we need to go back in time just a bit farther.

The socialist revolution, for the first time in class-divided society, brings the majority of humanity to power. It requires a workers' party and a workers' state to lead the transition and to overcome the resistance of the hitherto privileged, powerful and ruthless minority. The transition to workers' power cannot be achieved spontaneously or in a de-centralized fashion owing to the centralized nature of existing minority class rule. In addition, the uneven development of nations, and the de-synchronized nature of class conflict worldwide, impose the need for greater solidarity and stronger political organization of the dispossessed than ever before.

Fundamental differences over questions of party and state led to the first major split in the workers' movement, the split between Marxism and anarchism. For anarchists, individual self-expression takes priority over the collective discipline necessary to expropriate the expropriators. Individualism takes priority over the need to create a workers' state to overcome the resistance of the rich, and to

affect the transition from generalized poverty to generalized freedom from want.



(Mikhail Bakunin and Karl Marx)

The second major split in the workers' movement occurred over reformism. Revolutionary socialists have always been in the forefront of the fight for reforms. That is evident in the Communist Manifesto of 1848. In it you can see demands such as End child labour and Tax the rich. Reformism, however, is the doctrine of a gradual transition to socialism *relying on an accumulation* of reforms. It fosters illusions in the neutrality of the capitalist state as the vehicle for reform. Thus, it subordinates workers (those who

subscribe to this illusion) to the preservation of the system and its state. Gradualism or 'evolutionary socialism' as Edward Bernstein called it, combined with huge party and labour union bureaucracies, transformed the Socialist (Second) International into a pro-capitalist party that capitulated to national chauvinism and imperialist war.

The split in the Second International over the treacherous programme and practice of social democratic reformism, led to the formation of an internationalist, anti-war left wing at the Zimmerwald Conference in September 1915. Following the Russian Revolution, this political regroupment of the left led to the foundation in 1919 of the Communist (Third) International.

In Canada, the Communist Party was formed in 1921. Its founding convention took place in secret, in a barn near Guelph. Many of its initial members came from the left wing of the reformist Socialist Party of Canada and the Social Democratic Party of Canada.



The Russian Revolution was besieged by hostile imperialist armies. It suffered enormously from its isolation

and economic backwardness. A bureaucratic party elite, represented by Joseph Stalin, seized control. It curtailed workers' democracy, crushed socialist opposition and adopted a new programme that over-adapted to capitalist rule outside the USSR. The perspective of world revolution was replaced with the false utopia of 'socialism in one country'. Permanent revolution (that is, the need for a workers'-led revolution to lead the social transformation, especially in the poor countries) was supplanted by the old, discredited Menshevik notion of revolution by stages. The 'stages theory' relies on an alliance with the liberal or nationalist bourgeoisie. Under Stalin, socialist democracy was replaced by bureaucratic tyranny, accompanied by elite privilege, false propaganda, show trials, torture and the assassination of political opponents.

The divide in the Stalinist-dominated C.I. gave rise to the International Left Opposition in 1930, and the formation of the Fourth International in 1938. Leon Trotsky, a co-leader with Lenin of the Russian Revolution, played a leading role in the preservation of revolutionary Marxism, and its further development. Trotsky's analysis of the phenomena of Stalinism and of fascism in the 20th century was particularly significant. The Fourth International began as a small movement of educational groups in a few countries. In the 1960s, it attracted thousands of young militants, spread to all continents, and became a more substantial force in a number of countries, including France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Mexico, Brazil, Sri Lanka and Philippines. Its ideas are very influential in Latin America and Europe today.

The revolutionary continuity of the Fourth International in Canada starts with the Canadian branch of the Communist League of America in the 1930s. It proceeds through the Revolutionary Workers' Party in the 1940s, and the League for Socialist Action in the 1960s and 70s.

During the cold war, at the height of McCarthyism (in the late 1940s), the F.I. suffered splits which reflected the pressure of the capitalist ideological offensive. One current that split away from the FI developed the theory that the USSR had become capitalist, *state capitalist*. That designation meant that in any conflict between the USSR and US imperialism, workers should take *neither* side. This 'third camp' position was extended to China, North Korea, Vietnam and Cuba. Instead of defending the workers' states against imperialism, including defence of the relatively healthy workers' state and revolutionary leadership in Cuba, the third campists stood aside. Instead of calling for political revolution to replace the Stalinist dictators with socialist democracy in the Soviet Union and China, the 'third camp' proponents abstained from the struggle. Objectively speaking, this stance supports the imperialist-dominated status quo. The SWP in Britain and the International Socialists in Canada belong to this current. On policy towards Cuba, they are counter-revolutionary.



Another split from the F.I., which occurred in the 1950s, bent the stick in the other direction. It attributed revolutionary qualities to Stalinism and its derivative currents

such as Maoism, Titoism, Ho Chi Minh, Enver Hoxa, Kim Il Sung, etc. This current abandoned the idea of political revolution to establish socialist democracy in the deformed workers' states. A group called Workers' World Party in the US represents this tendency. A group with similar views, Fire This Time, operates in Vancouver.

The Fourth International divided in 1953, but it reunited in 1961 on the basis of recognition of the Cuban socialist revolution and its historic significance. But some Marxist groups rejected Trotskyist reunification on the grounds of a different assessment of the Cuban revolution, of the Vietnamese revolution, of black nationalism in the USA, of feminism and the new student movement. Those groups travelled to political outer space, to be joined by some others later. They all began their journey to never-never land by denying the new revolutionary political realities. This led them to ultra-left sectarian positions. One of them called on the multi-millions in the broad anti-war movement to demand "All Indochina Must Go Communist", rather than the principled, defensive slogan "U.S. Out Now". The ultra-left posture fostered an abstentionist practice, which begat internal cultism, artificial self-generated campaigns, undemocratic mini-dictatorial regimes, conspiracy theories, and a morbid preoccupation with attacking the sects closest politically to their own particular deformations. The most egregious examples of this phenomenon are the Trotskyist League (IST) and the Bolshevik Tendency. Another such group is known as the World Socialist Web Site or as the Socialist Equality Party. It refuses to intervene in mass working class parties, and it promotes conspiracy theories, such as the crank notion that leaders of the American SWP orchestrated the assassination of Leon Trotsky in 1940. Frankly, all those groups deserve one another. Unfortunately, they sometimes harass our press sellers and folks who come to our events. Our norm is that *we do not spend any time whatsoever arguing with such*

cranks who foul the air with absurd accusations and divert us from our pressing tasks.

Sadly, some leftists over-react to the sterile brew of sectarianism by abandoning revolutionary theory and organization altogether. They throw out the baby with the bathwater. They stumble backwards to reformism. This is what happened to the New Socialists, a group that originated in an anti-Leninist split from the I.S. over 25 years ago. The NS converged with the left-reformist Socialist Project, led by Leo Panitch (who sadly just passed away), Sam Gindin and Greg Albo. As the name implies, the Project does not favour the formation of a party. It is a network of academics and radicals. It has a sectarian attitude towards the NDP, a passive stance towards the labour bureaucracy, and has no ongoing political intervention into the social justice movements. The SP believes in reforming the capitalist state from within, although ironically, it is abstentionist on the electoral front.



Another group on the scene is Fightback (IMT). When it was present in the NDP, it refused to build a united NDP left wing, such as the Socialist

Caucus. Fightback devotes most of its energy to forming student groups on university campuses. Fightback is Canadian chauvinist on the Quebec national question. It is hostile to Palestinian self-determination and it opposes the global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign aimed at the Zionist apartheid state. In third world countries, sections of the IMT join populist-capitalist parties, like the ruling PPP in Pakistan and the PRD in Mexico.

The main US Trotskyist party for 45 years, the SWP, degenerated in the late 70s and 1980s. It broke with Permanent Revolution and in 1983 it expelled its Trotskyist cadres. This cult, led by Jack Barnes, defends the Zionist state and gave back-handed support to Donald Trump as a vector of populist discontent. The Communist League is the SWP affiliate in Canada, with a branch only in Montreal.



And what about the grand-daddy of the radical left, the Communist Party, from which we trace our origins? The CP is reformist and Canadian nationalist to the core. It strives for a multi-class or 'popular front' government. The

popular front, as opposed to the united front, subordinates workers' parties to capitalist parties in the pursuit of power. In Canada, the popular front would include the "progressive wing" of the Liberal Party. It incorporates the mistaken view, also held by CPC-ML, that Canada is a colony of American imperialism, not an imperialist power in its own right. The CP supported the power bid by the alliance of the Liberals, the NDP and the Bloc Quebecois in December 2008. The CP is a sclerotic shell of its storied past. It is both unwilling and unable to account for, much less to break with the sad legacy of Stalinist sexism, homophobia, treachery and political repression.

As you can see, the English Canadian left is littered with much political detritus. The Quebec left has its own similar story. The divisions on the left are rooted in history and are based in strategic, programmatic and operational differences. Still, some left activists say "Why can't those differences be put aside, for the sake of unity?" But the real question is: "How long would an unprincipled unity last?" The truth is this: If all the existing forces of the radical left were to combine suddenly, with all their differences intact, the result would be as unstable as nitro-glycerine. At the first controversy, such an unprincipled amalgam would explode into an array of fragments, further demoralizing everyone within its blast radius.

But, knowing all this, why can't the various groups recognize reality and arrive at a principled unity? One reason is the relatively low level of class struggle in this society. A higher level of class struggle would rapidly put many theories to the test. It would help to separate fact from fiction. It would separate correct ideas from wrong-headed ones. That remains the music of the future. Unfortunately, socialists are compelled to work under existing conditions, not under those we might choose. We cannot afford to wait until conditions are more to our liking – that is, if we really

want to influence conditions in a revolutionary direction, and ultimately to win.

Furthermore, we know that class struggle is ongoing and global, and that revolution is an outcome of that ongoing process. Socialists strive to advance the class struggle where we live and work, and to mobilize support for workers' struggles, and especially for revolutionary breakthroughs, wherever they do occur. So, given that the overall level of class struggle is relatively low, and given that the left is fragmented, what is the best way, under present circumstances, to test theory in practice and to magnify the impact of the actually existing left? In our view, the best way forward is offered by the united front tactic. The united front entails unity in action, chiefly of working class organizations. It is a limited form of unity in which the participants can agree on one issue, on one cause. It does not require agreement on a full program; it does not require merger into one party, nor the adoption of a grand strategy for revolutionary change. The united front approach fosters the test of common practice and a common dialog involving diverse participants. It lays the basis, albeit on a small scale, for the advent of pluralism, for mutual respect, and for the very socialist democracy of the future that will replace capitalist rule.

That is the approach of Socialist Action - Ligue pour l'Action Socialiste in the Canadian state. SA is a democratic centralist organization that stands on a revolutionary socialist programme. A central pillar of it is socialist democracy and the united front perspective.



From where did SA come? Fast forward from the convention in a barn in 1921. The League for Socialist Action fused with the Revolutionary Marxist Group and the Quebec-based Groupe Marxiste Revolutionnaire in 1977 to form the Revolutionary Workers' League. The RWL made some big errors in its first four years. It adopted an extreme "turn to industry" tactic. It pressed its white-collar worker members to quit their jobs, go to work in factories, and passively observe. The RWL became intolerant of dissent. It shrank to a tiny rump. Emerging from the ruins of the RWL were the Socialist Workers' Collective, and the Alliance for Socialist Action, which joined Socialist Challenge in English Canada. Socialist Challenge linked up with Gauche socialiste in Quebec. But the SC and the Gs drew the wrong lessons from the experience of the RWL. Most of their leaders blamed Leninism for the fall of the RWL and the radical left in Canada, instead of blaming the decline in the class struggle that occurred in the 1980s. They blamed the strategy of revolutionary party building, instead of blaming get-rich-quick schemes. Then the SC-Gs expelled the proponents of party building still in its ranks. They wanted instead to build a loose network, not a revolutionary workers' party. These ex-Trotskyists of the SC-Gs expelled Elizabeth and me in 1993. Why? Because we insisted that the

policies democratically adopted at convention should be implemented, and that members should pay dues, attend meetings and sell our press.

A handful of comrades joined us. Together we founded Socialist Action in Canada in 1994. Socialist Action-USA, which arose from expulsions from the American SWP a decade earlier, supported our efforts generously. To this day, we write for and circulate the same monthly newspaper. We appealed the expulsions that occurred in Canada to the World Congress of the Fourth International in 1995. The F.I. voted to designate SA Canada “a group of partisans of the F.I. that is invited to participate in the meetings and activities of the F.I., with the agreement of Gauche socialiste.” But the Gs subsequently did not agree. It blocked our participation in the world movement for 26 years. We are remedying that situation now, working with comrades in several countries, inside and outside the F.I., as part of the Platform for a Revolutionary Workers’ International. Meanwhile, the Gs has disappear from the political landscape.

SA is actively involved in a variety of political campaigns and in a number of social movements, including for indigenous rights, for an end to poverty, for feminism and ecology, and in opposition to racism, homophobia and fascism. We act in solidarity with revolutionary Cuba, defend self-determination for Venezuela, and support movements of anti-imperialist resistance in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and Haiti. We have initiated and led broadly supported actions in solidarity with Venezuela and the Palestinian people. The united front approach permeates everything we do.



Our primary orientation is to the working class, and to its labour and political institutions. Unlike the rest of the Canadian left, SA is not just *present* in mass working class organizations -- we are *actively involved* in building a class struggle left wing opposition in the unions and inside the labour-based NDP. Other groups on the left either abstain from the NDP arena, or adapt to the treacherous policies of the NDP leaders by embracing reformism and supporting reformist leaders almost uncritically. Neither course is the way forward. SA practices participation in the struggle for socialist policies and for a Workers' Agenda. This is explained in our booklets "Prospects for Socialism in Canada" and "Vote NDP, Fight for Socialist Policies, Build the NDP Socialist Caucus". In other words, we are for 'conflictual participation', not for political submission, not for cheerleading, and not for abstention, in relation to the NDP.

What has SA accomplished? Quite a lot for a small party. We played a very visible role in the Days of Action in Ontario, the general strikes in ten cities, especially in Toronto in October 1996, against the Conservative Mike Harris government. Elizabeth co-chaired the rally of a quarter million that stretched from the Ontario Legislature to Front Street, and introduced Billy Bragg who sang his

song *Power in the Union* to the vast crowd. We built international solidarity, defended workers' strikes and public services, opposed imperialist wars, and confronted racists and fascists. We successfully fought for anti-war and socialist policies in the NDP. The Socialist Caucus, which we lead, in 2006 won the NDP to demand Canada Out of Afghanistan. The SC initiated and won the leadership review in 2015 that led to the removal of neo-liberal NDP Leader Tom Mulcair. SC comrades have been elected NDP district association president, even won NDP candidate nominations. One of our members came very close to winning a seat in the BC provincial election in 2020. One of our members is the current interim leader of the NDP in New Brunswick. SA members have won election to the OPSEU provincial executive, running on an explicitly class struggle platform. We are partisans of the Workers' Action Movement. WAM is a class struggle caucus in a number of unions. It seeks to end concessions bargaining, 2-tier wages, and aims to replace the bureaucratic leaders with union democracy, from the bottom up. WAM candidates for the top offices in the Ontario Federation of Labour won 36 per cent of the votes cast at the OFL Convention in November 2019. Like the Socialist Caucus in the NDP, WAM embodies the united front approach. It brings together Marxists, anarchists, left social democrats and others who want to put the *movement back into Labour*.

Here are a few more examples of our application of the united front tactic.

In the absence of an official parade of unions on September 7, SA hosted a rally to mark Labour Day in Toronto. Reps of several unions, social justice groups and leftist parties spoke. At a similar rally in Montreal, the local sponsor, Fightback, would not allow the Socialist Action spokesperson to speak, while in Toronto we invited that group and all others to speak to the crowd.

In early October, SA initiated a diverse and successful rally called Peel Against Racism. It protested racism inside the Peel school board, and police murders of innocent people of colour in Mississauga. Earlier, in Peel, we held a public rally for Free Mass Transit, endorsed by Climate Justice Peel, TTC Riders and the Socialist Project.

We work with other groups in the Labour May Day Committee, which held a successful online event in 2020 and is currently planning one for May 2021.

In January SA hosted a rally outside a Long Term Care facility in Scarborough called Tendercare where scores of seniors have died. Four TV networks reported our call for Nationalization of private, for-profit Long Term Care corporations.

Our candidate in the Ward 22 city by-election, Corey David, reinforced the SA call for a socialist coalition in the 2022 municipal elections – across Canada!



In British Columbia, SA is a founding partner in the Vancouver Unity Assembly.

And as already mentioned, the exemplary leftist alliances, the Socialist Caucus and WAM, show the way forward, right in the heart of the workers' movement.

SA has introduced socialist ideas to thousands through our Rebel Films, our weekly webcasts, our popular website and YouTube channel, public forums, May Day celebrations, concerts, study groups, and our annual Trotsky School in the Fall.

Our membership is growing across the country, tripling in size in the past three years. We host a monthly Pan-Canadian Zoom conference call. Each June we hold a cross-country educational conference, and a convention for members to decide matters of policy, tactics, general orientation, budget, and to elect party leaders.

Members pay monthly dues, sell SA newspapers (in non-pandemic conditions) and attend online meetings on a regular basis. New members pass through a provisional membership period of three months to determine their suitability for full member status. Racism, sexism, homophobia and harassment are incompatible with membership in SA. We practice democracy in discussion and unity in action. All members, including leaders, are duty bound to carry out the adopted policies of the organization – unlike labour and NDP leaders who routinely disregard convention decisions in favour of their personal positions and individual career interests.

We practice what we preach, and we preach what we practice. That enables us to shine a bright beacon of hope in a dark, tormented and cynical world. Education is indispensable for those who want to gain a better *understanding* of the world, which is why we place such a great emphasis on it.

Socialist Action is an organization for those who want to *change* the world. SA is for people who want to replace the tyranny of capitalist minority rule with the immensely creative potential of a democratic, cooperative commonwealth.

Membership in SA is not a right. It is a privilege for those willing to dedicate themselves to that goal, and to make the sacrifices necessary to advance the process to achieve it. No workers' strike, certainly no social revolution, is won without great effort. But with effort comes knowledge, skills, comradeship, solidarity, and the satisfaction of knowing that one's life is linked to the greatest possible purpose – total human emancipation.

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