

NOTES OF THE MONTH

The People's Front—France, Spain, China—Lessons for Britain—No Mechanical Transference—Origin of the People's Front—Working Class Unity the Basis—Initiative of the Communist Party—Contrast to Parliamentary Coalition Policies—Mass-Basis—Future of the People's Front in France—The Blum Government and the Communist Party—Lessons from Spain—The United States and the Farmer-Labour Party—Situation in Britain—Working Class Unity the Key—“ Liberal-Labour ” Travesties—Confusions on the People's Front—The Pivot of Change in Britain.

WITHIN one year and a half of the first broaching of the conception in any country, to-day the “ People's Front ” is dominating the political situation in a series of countries both inside and outside Europe, and is in the forefront of discussion in all countries. This is a very significant example of the power of living Marxist theory to anticipate political needs, and by anticipating them to shape events. In France, in Spain, in a series of South American countries and in China the People's Front has registered a series of successes. These successes are already exercising a far-reaching effect on the international political situation, in strengthening the front against the fascist war offensive and encouraging the popular forces in all countries, and are likely to have still further effect as the situation develops. In the other countries, where such a front has not yet been realised, the impetus towards its realisation is strong and the problems involved have become the centre of widespread discussion. The discussion has shown, however, that there is still considerable need to clear further these problems, and to find the path to remove out of the way the obstacles that still block the path of realisation of this basic aim in the special conditions of countries such as Britain.

THE immediate cause of this wide present interest in the conception of the People's Front, and impetus towards its realisation in the countries where it does not yet exist, lies undoubtedly in the brilliant recent victories achieved by this method in France and Spain, where it has shown its power to turn the tide of fascist reaction and to open the road to new advance, as also in its less widely heralded success in China, where it is also transforming the situation, building up a united national front of resistance to the Japanese invasion and already leading to a process of differentiation within the Chiang Kai Shek government. But while the immediate impetus of any merely imitative response in other countries may prove temporary, in proportion as the extremely complicated problems of the further development of the line unfold themselves, also in France and Spain, the deeper cause of this wide response in all countries evidently lies in the fact that the conception reflects deeply felt needs of the present stage, the need of a wide massing of forces against the offensive of reaction, against fascism and against the present ever more menacing war offensive. Such a massing of forces is essential if we are to win the present battle for peace and against reaction, and thus prepare the way for further advance on the basis of the mobilisation of the majority of the population around the leadership of the working class against monopoly capital.

UNDoubtedly the examples of the popular victories in France and in Spain are a powerful lesson for England. They demonstrate the possibilities of the popular surge of advance against fascism and against war which is developing throughout the world (the Japanese elections in February revealed the same lesson, with the strong swing to the left, the routing of the open fascist candidates, and the over half-million votes for the workers' and peasants' *bloc* under conditions of terrorism ; the immediately following fascist murder-coup was the fascist answer to these results.) The anger of the peoples against fascism, against the fascist war offensive, and against the policies of capitulation and division which have smoothed the path to these, is rising ; the problem is to find

the forms and leadership to give it expression. It is a matter for profound mortification that in this general popular advance Britain should be the black spot, where the existing dominant reactionary policies and leadership of the Labour Party are still able to thwart and choke popular expression, and the National Government is still able to hold power as the bulwark of fascism, reaction and the war offensive throughout the world. The contrast between the election defeat in England and the election victories in France and Spain is a merciless contrast between the outcome of the policies of division and passive capitulation and the outcome of the policies of unity and mass action. In France and Spain they had the united front of socialists and communists ; they had the people's front ; they had active mass fight throughout the country ; they directed the fight on class lines against the finance-capitalist and landlord oligarchy ; they fought the foreign policy of capitulation to fascism ; and on this basis they conquered. In Britain, under the leadership of the Labour Party, denouncing unity, opposing the class struggle, applauding the foreign policy of the National Government, assisting Hitler, all this basis of fight was lacking, and the outcome was defeat. These lessons must be learned.

THESE lessons, however, cannot be transferred mechanically, but require to be learned in principle, and worked out freshly in relation to specific conditions. The form of realisation of the necessary mass concentration of forces against reaction and war requires to correspond to the widely differing conditions in different countries ; there is no ready-made formula. The magic of the People's Front does not lie in the title ; the secret lies in the application of certain principles to the actual relations of class forces. In France and in Spain the correct forms appropriate to the situation in those countries has been found. In Britain, the United States and other countries their realisation is still a considerable way off, and many preliminary steps are needed. The current discussion in Liberal and Labour circles in Britain and other countries of the possibilities of the People's Front can be of

great use ; but at present it reveals widespread misconceptions even going so far as a failure to understand the elementary difference between the " Front Populaire " and the old " Cartel des Gauches," or electoral-parliamentary Left *Bloc*. In consequence, it may be of use to endeavour to clear further in principle and in practice the conception of the People's Front, both in relation to the countries where it has been realised, in France and in Spain, and in relation to the possibilities in such countries as Britain and the United States.

THE conception of the People's Front was first formulated in any country on October 24, 1934, by Maurice Thorez, Secretary of the French Communist Party, in a speech at Nantes where the Radical Party Congress was being held. In this connection the book of Thorez which has recently appeared, entitled *France To-day and the People's Front*, is extremely timely, and should greatly help in bringing about a clearer understanding in England of the principles and methods of the People's Front.* Thorez sticks closely to his subject of the concrete situation, the specific steps of advance and the rival programmes in France ; he does not concern himself with discussing in any detail the future line of development ; on some questions, notably in the sphere of foreign policy, and on the problems in connection with the government to follow the elections, he might with advantage have written more fully. But his concrete analysis, if carefully studied, serves to bring out very clearly the underlying principles of the People's Front. It is impossible for any one to read this account without learning to understand the very clear analysis of class forces on which the whole policy is based, and the consequent line worked out in relation to the given class structure.

WHAT stands out from this analysis ? First, the united working class front was fully realised in France before the conception of the People's Front arose. This does not mean that the same chronological order must always be necessary ; it is conceivable that in some cases the realisation

**France To-day and the People's Front*. By Maurice Thorez. Gollancz. 5s.

of a broad popular front may smooth the path to the realisation of working-class unity. But it does demonstrate the fact that the core of such a broad popular front must be the united working class forces, consciously pursuing their independent class line within any combination, if such a combination is not to be an unprincipled amalgam of disparate elements, in which the working class is in reality taken in tow by the bourgeoisie. The leadership of the working class is essential in a common popular front ; and this leadership requires working-class unity. The fight for working-class unity was first carried through by the Communist Party right up to its realisation in July, 1934. The opposition of the Socialist Party leadership was steadily broken down by mass pressure from below ; the united front was not realised at a blow, but was built up by tireless effort, locally in the first place, also through non-party organisations such as the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, then extending to regional federations, and finally reaching its realisation at the top in the Unity Pact of July 27, 1934. Then only, in October, 1934, followed the first proposition from the Communist Party for the further extension and reinforcing of the United working-class front by the People's Front.

SECOND, the initiative for the People's Front came at each stage from the Communist Party, at first against the hesitations and opposition of the Socialist Party. What is the significance of this ? The significance is once again the demonstration of the hegemony of the working class within a broad popular front, without which it can only become an instrument of the bourgeoisie. This principle of the hegemony of the working class was expressed by the initiative of the Communist Party. In October, 1934, the Communist Party put forward the first proposition for " a People's Front for liberty, work and peace." In December, 1934, the Communist Party put forward the proposal for the building of local elected Committees of the People's Front throughout the country. In May, 1935, the Communist Party parliamentary fraction (i.e., *after* the mass basis had been built) invited the other parliamentary groups, Socialists, Pupists, Radicals, etc.,

to a common meeting at which the lines of co-operation were drawn up. On July 14, 1935, the People's Front was sealed by the oath of ten thousand elected delegates, repeated by demonstrations of hundreds of thousand the same day. In January, 1936, the Programme of the People's Front was published. The recognition by the Radicals of the rôle of the Communist Party in building this common front was testified by the Radical journal, *La République* :

Generations to come will thank the Communist Party for the important part it played in the formation of the People's Front. (*La République*, January 7, 1936.)

THIRD, the building up of the People's Front on this basis and in this manner marks out its distinction from the old type of electoral-parliamentary left *bloc* combination or "Cartel des Gauches," or from earlier types of left collaborationism, which subjected the working class to the leadership of the bourgeoisie. Thorez explains in the following terms the line of the Communist Party "to avoid the twofold errors of Jaurès and of Guesde at the time of the Dreyfus affair":

Jaurès let himself be taken in tow by the middle-class democracy, and did not sufficiently guard the special interests of the working class and the independence of its party in the course of supporting the Liberal sections of the capitalists against the reactionary sections, who drew their support from the Church and the General Staff. On the other hand, Guesde, lacking tactical flexibility, to some extent placed himself right outside a conflict which had roused considerable masses of the people.

The Communist Party refuses to treat all capitalist parties as "a single reactionary mass," or to believe that on the social chess-board there are only two forces, two great armies facing each other—the capitalist army and the socialist army. Such a conception of things is too simple.

The proletariat, while pursuing its own aims, must secure alliances, whether temporary or lasting, with the peasant masses and the democratic middle classes, in order to prevent the victory of Fascism in France and to change the relation of forces on the international scale in favour of the proletariat. The People's Front is the gathering together of all the forces of labour exploited by the capitalists and menaced by Fascism. . . . It is constantly drawing into the fight

new masses, new social strata outside the proletariat, but drawn into its orbit because the proletariat is the driving force in all activities against Fascism and the organiser of the people's victories over its enemies." (pp. 177-8.)

In this explanation are involved the fundamental conceptions of the People's Front, the basic principles applicable in varying forms to all countries.

"THE People's Front," explains Thorez, "cannot be compared with the groupings for the purpose of collaboration between the working class and the capitalist class, of which we find only too many examples in the history of the Third Republic in France before the war and in the history of Germany and Austria after the war." Why? First, because the leadership is in the hands of the working class; the petit-bourgeois elements, only after an inner struggle and a break of the majority from the previous direct links with the big bourgeoisie (reflected in the conflict and split in the Radical Party) came over towards the leadership of the working class. Second, because the basis of the People's Front is a *mass basis*: in place of the usual electoral-parliamentary combination on top, it is rooted in the masses, in the local elected Committees of the People's Front through the country. This is the aspect of the People's Front which arouses the strongest anger and alarm of the bourgeois press organs in France. And this is the aspect which is least understood in discussion in other countries when political wiseacres propound the old types of "liberal-labour" parliamentary combination in the name of the idea of the "People's Front." Without this mass basis the parliamentary co-operation of the party representatives in France would be a brittle and dangerous reed; the parliamentary rôle can only have value as the reflection of the will and activity of the masses.

WHAT of the future of the People's Front in France? Critical tasks and problems now lie before the People's Front following its electoral victory. It is essential to utilise the situation created by this victory in order to smash

completely every unit of fascist organisation, and every hold of reaction and fascism in the official services, the police and the army. Politically, this is the most important task before the new Government to be formed ; the effectiveness in fulfilling this task will be decisive for the next stage, since the forces of fascism and reaction lie in wait to take advantage of every mistake and weakness in order to create confusion, first financial and economic, then political, and strike their blow ; and the effectiveness in carrying out this task will finally depend, not on paper decrees, but on securing the active co-operation of the masses throughout the country. Second, it is essential to carry through the fight for the agreed programme of immediate economic demands of the masses against the finance-capitalist oligarchy. Third, it is essential to carry through the fight for the foreign policy of peace against the pro-fascist tendencies in foreign policy.

THESE are the tasks of the new Blum Government to be formed on the basis of the support of the People's Front. On the other hand, the masses composing the People's Front are not yet ready to advance further to basic attack against the existing class régime. The situation in France will necessarily develop further to acute struggles, in the course of which the masses will increasingly convince themselves of the necessity for basic change. The Communist Party, in accordance with its clearly defined pre-election statements, gives full support to the new Government to carry through these urgently necessary measures of the present stage of fight, without directly participating in the Government. The task of the Communist Party lies with the masses in the development of the mass front. The standpoint of the Communist Party was proclaimed by Thorez in a speech on May 15 :

We shall not participate, although we wish at all costs the success of the People's Front both in the parliamentary sphere and in the sphere of government. . . . We shall support effectively the government of to-morrow by the development of popular committees ; for what can be secured in parliament can only be secured through the will and activity of the masses. We shall not participate, because we wish our country to go further ; Soviet Power, that is our faith

and our certainty, demonstrated by the example and the life of our brothers of the Soviet Union ; under the leadership of a united party of the working class we shall realise the creation of a new society.

Once again on the Communist Party lies the key rôle, alike for the strengthening of the People's Front and of the Government based on it, and for further advance.

IF we turn from France to Spain, we find there a different situation. In Spain a revolutionary cycle is developing since 1931. The struggle against fascism has already developed to the point of armed warfare in 1934 ; and the armed battles of 1934 (deplored at the time by right wing social democracy of the German and British type as vain and useless struggle, doomed to defeat) laid the basis for the triumphant advance of the People's Front in 1936 and the discomfiture—though not yet the smashing—of fascism. But here again certain basic principles of the People's Front are demonstrated. The core of the People's Front is once again the united working class front, uniting socialists and communists in a single phalanx. The united front of socialists and communists was realised in September, 1934 ; the People's Front was realised in January, 1936. And here again the basis of the People's Front is no mere electoral-parliamentary combination, but the united action of the masses in struggle. This is the heart of the meaning of the People's Front.

WHAT of the lessons of the victories of the People's Front for the countries where the People's Front does not yet exist ? Here again it is necessary to distinguish sharply the different situations. The People's Front is one thing in the capitalist-democratic countries, another in the fascist countries, and another in the colonial countries. Here for the moment we are concerned with the immediate lessons and problems for the other leading capitalist-democratic countries, especially the United States and Britain. But between these two countries also the conditions differ completely. In the United States the mass of the workers

still follow the two old capitalist parties, especially the Democratic Party, although discontent with both increases and a host of varied and contradictory tendencies towards a "third party" are visible. There is only a tiny Socialist Party, with a more restricted influence than the Communist Party, and no Labour Party. The main task here clearly lies in the development of a united Farmer-Labour Party, on the basis of the mass organisations of the workers, the farmers and the progressive elements of the urban petty bourgeoisie, with the united working class vanguard playing the leading rôle in its development and organisation. This line has favourable possibilities in the growth of the left wing in the American Federation of Labour, expressed in the fight for industrial unionism, and has rallied the support in principle of about one third of the American Federation of Labour. On the other hand, the recent formation by a group of left wing trade union leaders of the so-called Non-Partisan Committee, actually for the support of Roosevelt, has complicated the situation. The movement towards a Farmer-Labour Party develops in a series of localities; and the outcome of the national convention called by the Minnesota Farmer-Labour Party to explore the possibilities for the formation of a nation-wide Farmer-Labour Party will be awaited with interest.

FINALLY in Britain the situation is here also fully distinct in character. The industrial proletariat constitutes the decisive majority of the population, to an extent without parallel in any other country. The radicalisation of the petty bourgeois elements goes forward, but does not yet find effective political expression. The old Liberal Party is in disintegration, but remains a party of sections of the big bourgeoisie, not a party of the petty bourgeoisie comparable to the French Radical-Socialist Party. The Labour Party appears as a federal body of the working class organisations, with its individual membership also open to petty bourgeois elements. But behind this form the Labour Party still continues in its official policy and leadership a rigid social democratic line of refusal of working class unity, rejection of the class struggle and

exclusion of militant working class elements ; and at the same time by this rigid line, reflecting the domination of the right wing labour bureaucracy, thwarts also the effective participation of the radicalised elements of the petty bourgeoisie, and fails to win the support of the majority of the population.

IT is clear that here the key to advance lies in the development and transformation of the Labour Party as a real united coalition party of all the working class forces, abandoning the discriminatory regulations and accepting the affiliation of the Communist Party. Once the Labour Party is thus re-vitalised and able to lead and express a united working class, it can also win the co-operation of the radicalised elements of the petty bourgeoisie, who at present seek vainly for a political home, expressing equal disappointment with the older parties and with the Labour Party ; and it can win their co-operation either directly, within the broad framework of its constitution, giving them a larger field of direct expression and participation in policy, or through such special forms of co-operation as may develop, as in the broad anti-fascist movements, etc. But the decisive key to advance lies in the realisation of the united working-class front and its expression in the Labour Party ; on this depends the next stage of advance and the concentration of the fight against the National Government. This does not mean that there is not already now, before the united working class front is realised on a nation-wide scale, room and scope for fruitful co-operation between the militant working class elements and the radicalised petty bourgeoisie in special fields of struggle, *e.g.*, in the fight for civil liberties against reaction and fascism, in the fight for peace against the war offensive, etc. These developments already going forward prepare the way for a wide common front ; but there is not yet here the solution of the problem of the People's Front ; the solution of this requires the realisation of working class unity.

FROM the examination we have made of the whole conception of the People's Front it is evident that the proposals at the moment put forward by certain bour-

geois-liberal journalists and right wing elements of the Labour Party for some form of Liberal-Labour combination, or Liberal-Labour-I.L.P. combination (excluding Communism as "too extreme") as a supposed form of realisation of the "People's Front" in Britain is a travesty which bears no relation to the People's Front. This is only a reactionary move to save the dying remnants of the Liberal Party and the right wing domination of the Labour Party against the advance of the united working class front, and therefore also against the People's Front. These stale calculations in terms of parliamentary combinations see only with greedy eyes the figures of the election returns in France, but they do not understand their meaning; they do not see the heart of the People's Front, in its basis in the masses and in its basis in the unity of the working class.

A VARIANT of a similar tendency is to be found in a recent article of G. D. H. Cole, entitled "Planning and Socialism," in the *New Statesman and Nation* of May 9, 1936. The writer discusses the question of the People's Front in relation to France, Spain and Britain, but appears to confuse the question with the economic "planning" of the De Man type, and sees neither the mass basis of the People's Front, nor the basis in working class unity. Of the People's Front in France he writes in terms of the familiar legend of the boulevard press:—

The Franco-Soviet Pact converted the Communists into allies of the Socialists and Radicals.

The intensified Communist fight for the united front dates from March, 1933; the Unity Pact of Communists and Socialists was reached in July, 1934; the People's Front was proposed by the Communists in October, 1934; the Franco-Soviet Pact was first drawn up and initialled in May, 1935. Cole continues, after touching on the rôle of fascism in uniting the democratic parties in France:

In Great Britain, however, there has been no comparable pressure upon the democratic forces to join hands.

The National Government in Britain has continued for five years, has carried through its offensive of reaction in every field, constitutes the central bulwark of fascism and of the

fascist war offensive throughout the world ; and yet the urgency of this fight is not seen, because open fascism is still weak. Finally Cole makes his proposal :

I am by no means suggesting the expediency of a Liberal-Labour alliance. Far from it ; parliamentary Liberalism is highly unpromising material for any Front Populaire designed to further a constructive policy. I have in mind rather a more openly friendly and collaborative attitude towards individuals at present outside the Labour ranks, but largely at one with the immediate objectives of Labour policy. For what the Labour cause needs most of all to-day is a strengthening of personnel."

" A strengthening of personnel " as the form of realisation of the People's Front in Britain ! In place of the politics of masses we have the politics of " individuals. " But the " strengthening of personnel " is also in reality a mass political question, and the solution lies below, not on top.

THE sterility and stagnation of the present official Labour Party at the existing stage is complained of on all sides and by all wings. But they do not yet see the cause ; that this is only the reflection of the surgical operation which has deprived the Labour Party of its lifeblood, of its driving energy, the militant vanguard. The exclusion of the Communists and militant sympathisers from the Labour Party is far more than a question of the numbers involved ; it is a question of the leadership that Communism represents and of the class-power that class unity can achieve. *These political surgeons have first castrated the bull of Labour, and now complain that the resultant ox lacks life and fire.* For those who would seek to realise the People's Front in Britain, the first immediate task is to transform the Labour Party into a real coalition party of all the working class forces, with the support of the popular forces, in Britain, based on and reflecting the mass struggle ; and all else will follow from this. The affiliation of the Communist Party to the Labour Party is the pivot for decisive change in the political situation in Britain ; once this is achieved, new life will develop in Labour politics, and the way will be open, not only to a powerful mass front of the working class, but to a powerful mass front of all the popular forces. This is the next stage in the fight for a People's Front in Britain.