

THE POPULAR FRONT AND THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF FRANCE

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THE POPULAR FRONT AND THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF FRANCE

I. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to assess the implementation of the popular front policy of the Communist International in France, where the policy was considered the most successful. In particular, two questions are taken up. One: were the united front and later the popular front tactics in France justified by the threat of a fascist takeover? and two: was it correct to support a Popular Front government and attempt to govern the country with other forces representing the working class and the petty-bourgeoisie in the same old capitalist framework?

The first question stems from the change in Comintern line. According to the VII Comintern Congress, the application of united front tactics in a new manner (that is, participating in joint actions with the Social-Democrats with the emphasis on unity rather than differences) was justified, and indeed required, when fascism threatened to take power in a country. Said Georgi Dimitroff in his report to the Congress:

...How can fascism be prevented from coming to power and how can fascism be overthrown after it has been victorious? To this the Communist International replies: The first thing that must be done, the thing with which to begin, is to form a united front, to establish unity of action of the workers in every factory, in every district, in every region, in every country, all over the world. Unity of action of the proletariat on a national and international scale is the mighty weapon which renders the working class capable not only of successful defense but also of successful counter-attack against fascism, against the class enemy. (emphasis in original) (Georgi Dimitroff, The United Front, pp.30-31)

But did a serious fascist threat exist in France? And therefore was the Communist Party of France (PCF) correct to take up these tactics?

The second question arises because the PCF participated in the Popular Front government¹ of France from 1936-1938. Dimitroff had said this was a correct policy under certain conditions. Did those conditions exist in France? And did this policy succeed in staving off fascism?

In answering these questions it was also necessary to include background on the then current political and economic situation of France.

II. The Economic Crisis

Like most of the world France experienced depression and crisis on the economic front in the 1930's. However, the depression did not hit France as suddenly as it did the United States. Rather there was a gradual economic decline up until 1933. By then industrial production was 14% below its 1928 level. By 1935 it was 24% below. Official unemployment was estimated then to be from 800,000 to 850,000. Underemployment was even more widespread, especially in large-scale industry. Farm prices dropped which impoverished the agricultural sector. (Daniel R. Brower, The New Jacobins, p.23)

At the government level the falling national income meant loss of revenues for a government already deeply in debt. The government had "conservative" financial views and to balance the budget it cut back expenditures, especially in government employment and social programs.

The "active" population (adult, able to work) in 1936 was about 21 million.² Between 13 and 14 million were employed, about 6 million in industry, 800,000 in clerical work, 700,000 domestically. Between 1930 and 1934 there had been sharp wage reductions. For example, the Ministry of Mines statistics showed that total wages in all sections of mining dropped 38% in that period. Total income for all wage earners was estimated to fall 24% between 1930 and 1934, according to the economic journal Revue d'Economie Politique.

Unemployment generally, according to Thorez (and it seems likely), was at least three times the official figures because many workers, as here, were omitted from the statistics (seasonal workers, never-employed workers, etc.). There was no national unemployment insurance, only a little relief from local councils who were given subsidies by regional and federal governments for that purpose.

Underemployment, in industry particularly, was almost as devastating as unemployment. The work week was 48 hours, but only 57% of the industrial proletariat was working it in 1934, and still fewer in 1935.

The peasantry was still a large part of the French population (8 million total in 1926). About one-third were agricultural laborers, the other two-thirds working their own land. But of these a million were tenant farmers of one kind or another. These laborers and small proprietors had the most impoverished life of all with no social benefits and little organized strength. And of course the bulk of the land belonged to a few large estate holders. Two percent of the agricultural holdings covered 50% of the land owned by private persons.

Thorez referred to the oligarchy which ruled France, and certainly the "200 families" was a hot issue in the 1936 election campaign. There were 100,000 millionaires in France; of these 10,000 were worth over \$5 million each. They had a hold on the middle classes through transferable securities like French state loans or state guaranteed stock whose value depended on the banking magnates, because the banks controlled the interest rates. This caused holders in the middle classes to identify with the interests of the banks more than they might have otherwise. On the other hand, the crisis caused suffering in the petty-bourgeoisie, many persons going bankrupt in this period, others seeing their standard of living sharply reduced.

Two hundred companies had concentrated most of the wealth and power in their own hands. Their interests were represented by the Bank of France which acted as a concentrated expression in one place, and in one organization, of the power of capital. It is worth going into the structure of the Bank of France because of its role in determining economic policy of the government. The following is an example of how the Bank exerted pressure on the government:

The great sin that all critics of the Bank of France have laid at its doorstep is that this speculation on the probable devaluation of the franc during May 1935 was not checked in any way by the Bank. Although gold was running out at an alarming speed, it took a month before the Bank of France

decided to raise the bank rate from two and a half per cent first, to three per cent, and then, in rapid succession, to four per cent, and six per cent. By allowing speculation to go on unhindered for several weeks, the Bank of France was threatening the government with the prospect of a currency collapse (in addition to its earlier threat not to discount bonds), unless the government accepted the policy of deflation outlined some weeks earlier by M. de Wendel, the industrial magnate and one of the Regents of the Bank. At last, on May 23, after a long struggle, Flandin surrendered, and agreed to ask the Chamber for plenary financial powers--with a view to carrying out the programme of deflation desired by the Bank. At once the Bank rate was put up. (Alexander Werth, Which Way France? pp.143-144)

The Bank of France was governed by a Regency Council which consisted of a Governor, two Assistant Governors, three auditors, and fifteen Regents. The federal government appointed the Governor and two Assistant Governors. The others were elected by the two hundred largest shareholders of the Bank who were the largest industrial and financial powers in France. And although the Governor and Assistants were appointed by the government, they had to own a hundred shares of stock to serve. Usually the other Regents helped a satisfactory appointment to acquire these shares and, in addition, were able to offer lucrative posts on the boards of the biggest companies when the Governor should retire. The government appointments were not independent forces on the Council, therefore, but rather extensions of the oligarchy.

The Popular Front government reformed this structure in 1936 by giving each of the 40,000 shareholders one vote. Under the new structure the shareholders elected the three auditors and two of the Councilors. The new General Council consisted of twenty-three members including the Governor and two Assistant Governors. But now seven members represented the Finance Ministry and other financial government offices, two represented the ministries of National Economy and Colonies, six were chosen by the Minister of Finance from lists submitted by various public groups including the trade unions, one was elected by the Staff of the Bank, and one was appointed by the National Economic Council. The Governor was no longer required to be a shareholder and was paid a full salary for three years after leaving the Bank, during which time he could not hold any private employment.

This reform by the Blum government received much attention, as it seemed to bring the Bank firmly under the control of the State. But there is no evidence that this led to any radical changes in economic policy of the government, even during Blum's tenure, let alone later under more conservative leadership. It did allow certain moderate "New Deal" measures to be passed.

In the period 1934-1936, however, the capitalists still tightly controlled the Bank; the working class and much of the petty-bourgeoisie were seeing a sharp decline in their standard of living, and nothing effective was being done to relieve their situation. It was in this economic context that the tactics of the united front were developed by the Communist Party of France (PCF) and the Socialist Party (SFIO).

III. The Initiation of the Popular Front Tactics in France: Relations Between the Communist Party of France and the Comintern

The introduction of united front policy in France actually preceded the

1935 VII Congress of the Communist International by a few months. It was the first example of the policies the Comintern would take up in other countries.

A. PCF Tactics Previous to 1934.

United front tactics were not new to the PCF. For example, the PCF had often observed "republican discipline" in elections where the left, mainly the PCF and the SFIO, withdrew the weakest candidate so as not to split the left vote. In 1927, when the Comintern called "republican discipline" opportunism and insisted the PCF drop it, there was intense debate in the Central Committee and only a minority supported the new line. One of that minority was Thorez, four years later to become head of the party. One who resisted, and continued to resist, was Doriot, later to become a fascist sympathizer.

Despite the opposition of part of the PCF, the authority of the Comintern remained decisive. Partly to counteract the resistance the Comintern decided to involve the Communist Youth League in Party leadership (also tried in England) in 1928. A new system of collective leadership was attempted with Barbe and Celor from the Communist Youth League, Frachon and Monmousseau from the CGTU (Communist controlled federation of trade unions), and Thorez from the Party secretariat. By 1931 the leadership was dropped, however, when the Comintern removed everyone except Thorez, who was made head of the Party. (Thorez was then thirty-two years old, son of a miner's family in northern France, loyal to the Comintern and Communist Party all his life.) A Czech named Eugen Fried was sent to France to aid Thorez and represent the Comintern.

The PCF, under the leadership of Thorez, did adopt the new "class against class"³ tactics of the Comintern. "Republican discipline" was broken, agitation among workers increased, campaigns against reformist labor organizations were waged. In January, 1934, just before the "days of February", Doriot proposed the Central Committee modify these tactics, recognizing the distinction between fascism and bourgeois-democracy. He proposed a "united front from above" with the Socialists. Thorez refused to compromise the party line and downplayed the threat of the fascist leagues, rejecting the idea that they stood for something qualitatively different than the bourgeois government.

B. The Circumstances Leading to the "Pact for Unity of Action."

Before the Comintern line officially changed in 1935, there were developments in France which began, in fact, a united front policy on the part of the PCF. As I said, in January of 1934 the PCF downplayed the importance of the fascist leagues. It still advocated "class against class" tactics. Then occurred the famous "days of February" in France.

France was experiencing both governmental and economic crises. The depression had struck, cabinets were falling, reconstructing, and falling again. The Stavisky scandal⁴ had made headlines, compromising many government officials. Bourgeois-democratic government in France had probably never had less prestige. A number of organizations had formed, leagues, some of which were paramilitary, in reaction to the deteriorating situation. A reactionary press campaigned intensely against the "corrupt and outmoded" parliament. The most prominent of the leagues were the League of French Action, which wanted to restore the monarchy, and the Croix de Feu (Cross of Fire), which was essentially fascist. It was composed mostly of veterans and was highly disciplined. These two and

other organizations planned a huge demonstration on February 6. In the Place de la Concorde alone 100,000 people gathered. Serious fighting broke out. Fifteen people were killed (one a policeman); 1664 police were injured, and many demonstrators. Chiappe, head of the Paris police, was sympathetic to the fascists.

To further complicate matters, the PCF had also called for demonstrations, spread throughout the city in factories and public places. A Communist veterans organization was to demonstrate near the main right-wing one. According to Brower, they lost their identity as a separate movement, sometimes fighting the leagues, sometimes united with the leagues in fighting the police. Thorez, in his book France Today, neglects to mention any PCF participation on that day at all.

In any case, the Daladier government was forced to resign; whether the leagues had planned to do more, that is topple the Parliament altogether and establish their own government, is unclear. They seemed to be only a loose coalition at that point.

In the next few days there were counter-demonstrations by the working class, led by the PCF and the SFIO, but not working together at the top. On February 9, the PCF held a demonstration of 12,000 to 15,000 people. There was fighting, four demonstrators were killed, 64 wounded, and 141 police wounded.

On February 12 a general strike was organized by the SFIO and PCF together against fascism and the "fascist gangs." It was a huge success. For twenty-four hours everything stopped, except water, lights, and trains. Four and a half million workers participated. At Vicennes, 150,000 workers and sympathizers assembled. The strike was disciplined, there was no looting, little fighting. This was the first official joint action of the PCF and the SFIO.

How did the tactics come to change in the PCF? Thorez, in his book France Today, says that the Communists called for united anti-fascist action from the beginning, that they initiated the anti-fascist demonstrations and the SFIO came along reluctantly.

For many years, therefore, the Communist Party had been making efforts to bring about united action and to unify the forces of the working class. It remembered Lenin's statement that 'The unity of the proletariat is its essential weapon in the fight for Socialism.' (Maurice Thorez, France Today and the People's Front, p. 168)

Thorez's description may have been true in one sense, but it conveniently ignores the distinction between working for a united front from below and a united front from above. The former precluded the kind of joint actions the Party was now enthusiastically endorsing, although Thorez tried to claim it was all one long policy of striving for unity.

As for uniting in the fight against fascism, in February the PCF still held that the leagues were not the principal danger. Doriot, on February 2, called for a counterdemonstration, with the Socialists invited to participate. L'Humanite (the official PCF newspaper) editorialized (Andre Marty wrote it) that this was "anarcho-syndicalistic." The Central Committee refused to call for a demonstration with the Socialists, but did organize some small demonstrations to protest

the Stavisky scandal and to defend unemployed workers. But after February 6, apparently, large masses of party members united with socialists and liberals at rank and file level in joint demonstrations and actions. They put pressure on the PCF leaders to unite. Partly as a result of this pressure, the PCF organized their demonstrations on February 6 "at one and the same time against fascist gangs and against the government which protects and encourages them, against social democracy which, by its division of the working class, tries to weaken it and thus to permit a rapid worsening of the brutal class dictatorship." This was in L'Humanite. The next day, however, the newspaper condemned the actions of the police, the bloodshed of the French people, but not the fascist leagues. The Socialist Seine Federation proposed unity of action against the leagues the same evening, but Marty would not receive the delegates. While the above statement showed that the PCF felt it necessary to at least publicly combine a fight against fascism with the fight against social democracy, it had not abandoned the latter and did not intend to engage in joint actions with social-democrats.

On the 8th of February the PCF did call for a 24-hour general strike but abandoned it when the CGTU decided to participate in the one organized by the CGT (the Social-Democratic federation of trade unions). Instead the PCF had a huge demonstration on February 9, but it was badly organized and directed because of the leadership's indecision at this point. Most of the leaders were not even at the demonstration. The question facing the leadership was whether they should officially and whole-heartedly support the strike called by the CGT in a formal united action from above. They were against it as a matter of policy, but the CGTU (unions representing the communists) had already agreed to it, and clearly the rank and file were going to cooperate anyway, especially in the provinces where local joint committees were formed. Finally Fried, as the Comintern representative, took responsibility for approving the PCF's participation, and the strike was on.

But despite this first joint action, immensely popular with the rank and file of the PCF and the SFIO and immensely successful as a show of force against the fascists, struggle about the policy of joint actions continued in the Party until April. The Comintern position had not officially changed (though a sympathetic climate for united action was developing rapidly), and Thorez remained committed to the official Party line. Marty, editor of L'Humanite, was also militantly opposed to any movement defending a "democracy which is gradually being transformed into fascism." In March the Central Committee still spoke of tearing Socialist workers from "the paralyzing influence of their party." (Brower, p. 39) And the Central Committee was displeased with Socialist participation in subsequent Communist demonstrations. The only joint action they supported was through the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement,⁵ which the SFIO showed little interest in. Therefore, in effect, the SFIO took leadership of the anti-fascist movement, setting up thousands of vigilance committees throughout France which any organization could join.

In April the Comintern intervened. The French party was extremely divided. On the one hand some Communist cells and local Communist organizations were actively calling for defense of parliament and the Republic. Some entered vigilance committees, organized meetings with Socialists, and even agreed to suspend criticism of the SFIO. The chief spokesman for these tactics was Doriot,

who had formed the Saint Denis Vigilance Committee, backed by Jean and Ferrat on the Central Committee. A majority of the Saint Denis Party District supported him and in March they voted to send a report to the ECCI justifying their opposition to the Comintern line.

On the other hand, party leaders, including Thorez and Marty, led a campaign against united action, with L'Humanite especially active in their cause. There were attempts to isolate Doriot, he was not allowed to speak at demonstrations, etc. Although the March Central Committee acknowledged that fighting fascism was the central task of the party, a subtle change from their previous stand, the attack on "social fascists" was intensified even to disrupting SFIO meetings. The leadership also wanted to purge Doriot from the Party but his mass support was too obvious. They themselves were rapidly losing rank and file support. For example, the PCF vote dropped sharply in April by-elections, and an anti-fascist Communist meeting drew 300 people compared to a non-Communist one which drew 1800. However, in early April Thorez did win a vote within the Party condemning collaboration with the SFIO.

In a manner reminiscent of the handling of U.S. Party factionalism, the Comintern, on April 21, 1934, ordered both Thorez and Doriot to Moscow for resolution of their differences. Thorez went promptly, but Doriot made his excuses though he received three separate telegrams pressing him to go. Fried was evasive on the dispute and, given the Comintern's previous stand, Doriot probably assumed he had little support there, would lose by any decision made, and, in addition, would be isolated from his work in France, a consequence unquestionably desired by the Party leadership. Indeed, shortly after the first telegram a meeting in St. Denis ended in full-scale fighting between "Doriotites" and "Thorezcites."

The decision of the Comintern, in brief, was that fascism was the main danger and a united front of struggle must be offered to the Socialist Party. (The CI also gave the Party leave to expel Doriot, though the CI refrained from taking this action itself.) The immediate evidence of the decision was two long articles in Pravda: one, anonymous, called "For the United Front Against Discord"; the other, by Thorez, was called "The French Communist Party in the Struggle for the United Front."

One factor in the CI decision was that, in April, Germany rejected the Russian plan for preserving the independence of the Baltic states, which the Soviet Union took more significantly as a rejection of any German-Soviet alliance. At the same time relations were improving between France and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union, in other words, was seeing France as a bulwark against fascist aggression.⁶

The discussions around the change in the Comintern line are reported on in "The Seventh Congress of the Comintern on War and Revolution" and other reports. The immediate question for the PCF (and the Comintern) was how to institute the change in tactics in France. A change in leadership was one possibility, but Doriot had stayed in France, refusing to come to Moscow, and as indicated above, the CI lacked confidence in him. There being no other viable choices, Thorez was finally sent back to France in May with the task of implementing the change.

In the next couple of months Thorez tried to do this and still retain some consistency with the Party's previous position. The PCF did invite the SFIO to join the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement (not accepted by the SFIO) and held a conference on organizing the united front against fascism. But at the same time, the PCF criticized the SFIO sharply in the press and disrupted a Socialist demonstration honoring the 1871 Paris Commune. The SFIO would not agree to joint action unless the PCF agreed to suspend criticism; the PCF emphatically refused to do this. In mid-June the PCF still referred to the SFIO as the "principal social defenders of the bourgeoisie." The same struggle was going on in the Comintern, of course, and at first there were apparently no clear instructions given to Thorez. The SFIO broke off negotiations because of the PCF attacks on their party.

In late June 1934 the PCF had a national conference. Towards the end of it word was received from the Comintern (by a secret telegram from Manuilsky). Essentially it said to unite with the SFIO and to do it now; and just to be sure, a sample draft of a unity pact was enclosed. The PCF moved quickly, publicly promised to cease criticism (after one more try by Thorez at a pact which would have allowed such criticism) and presented to the SFIO the "Pact for Unity of Action" sent by Vassart from Moscow. (This pact was actually based on one originally suggested by the SFIO.) On July 27, 1934, it was signed by both parties. It called for a campaign of joint meetings and demonstrations to "mobilize the working population against the fascist organizations," for support of democratic liberties, for opposition to decree-laws, and opposition to fascist terror in Germany and Austria. (Brower, pp.60-62)

The PCF was much more united internally after this (Doriot had been isolated and expelled) and apparently received a certain amount of credit for initiating the united front. (Brower, p.62)

C. Development of Popular Front Tactics.

The following year saw the move from united front tactics to popular front tactics. Going beyond the pact with the SFIO, the PCF extended its hand to other groups. It put together an electoral program which included elements to appeal to the middle classes. The PCF ran for more offices, and again observed "republican discipline." They made gains in the October elections, but so did the Right, creating anxiety that a polarization such as occurred in Germany was developing. The PCF intensified its appeal to the lower petty-bourgeoisie, a potential base of support for fascism. They pushed to expand the popular front beyond anti-fascism to economic and political demands of the "working class, of the peasant workers, as well as the working strata of the urban petty-bourgeoisie." (Brower, p.71)

The Socialists, on the other hand, now dragged their feet. For one thing, the SFIO had a federal structure, which meant local districts and regions could decide the extent of their involvement in the united front. Not surprisingly, in some cases they were enthusiastic (Paris, Lyon), in others more indifferent or even hostile. Another disagreement was that the Socialists did not want the united front program extended beyond anti-fascist work. They wished to pursue their own economic and social program. For instance, they refused to support a strike campaign against the austerity measures of the Doumergue government proposed by the PCF.

It might be said that the Popular Front was soon somewhat successful in its immediate goal. League demonstrations declined, and huge enthusiastic crowds turned out for united front demonstrations. The workers seemed to show new spirit and confidence in the fight against fascism.

Incidentally, the first use of the term "popular front" in France was apparently a speech given by Thorez between the first and second ballot of the October elections. It was printed in L'Humanite on October 12, 1934 with the title "At All Costs, Defeat Fascism; For a Wide Anti-Fascist Popular Front." Brower states that the term was substituted for Thorez's "common front" by Fried, still the Comintern representative in Paris.

The Radical Party, the third major party counted as part of the French left, was actually hurt by the Popular Front, at least electorally. To count a Radical candidate in "republican discipline" the SFIO and PCF agreed the candidate must reject the Doumergue government (which had several Radicals in the Cabinet). Needless to say, this did not occur very often. Though some prominent Radicals dissented, party policy was to support the government of National Union. The popular front tactic was to appeal to liberals, to attract Radicals of the petty-bourgeoisie who might be receptive—in other words, with the Radicals it was still to be a united front from below.

By the following year, despite ups and downs in the relationship between the PCF and the SFIO, popular front politics were in full command. Nationalism was incorporated in the slogans and propaganda, and in the May 1936 elections the Popular Front coalition reached its height of mass support with the election of a Popular Front (Socialist-Radical-Communist) majority in the Chamber of Deputies and the establishment of the Blum government.

The use of nationalism, particularly in the 1936 election campaign, indicated a great deal about the change in line of the PCF. Previously the PCF had been very conscious of its internationalist responsibilities. It had recognized France as a major imperialist country and stressed the solidarity between colonial struggles and working class struggles in France. And underlying all its propaganda was a militant class consciousness. Its slogans in 1936, however, called for a "free, strong and happy France." It claimed to be defenders of "national reconciliation" as opposed to the fascists, who were "dividers of Frenchmen." A principal symbol was the "main tendue" or "outstretched hand."

IV. The Threat of Fascism Justified a United Front with the SFIO

A. The Strength of the Fascist Leagues.

The fascist threat varied during 1934-1938, which saw the beginning of the United Front, the expansion to the Popular Front, and finally, participation in a Popular Front electoral coalition by the PCF. It is easy to say in retrospect that the threat of a fascist takeover was not real because at the time it met with a militant, organized response sufficient to quell a direct seizure of power from the streets. But it should also be remembered that fascism had connections in government, that the fascist forces had indirect influence as well, through their supporters in the Chamber of Deputies and on the boards of major corporations. In short, they were linked to a section of the bourgeoisie.

There was undoubtedly in 1934 a huge mood of discontent and dissatisfaction with the Third Republic, justifiably. A number of paramilitary leagues sprang up and a reactionary press took up a campaign against the Republic. The Stavisky scandals provided them with an effective opening. The groups which took part in the February 6 movement and became best known were: the Croix de Feu (Cross of Fire), Action Francaise (French Action League), Jeunesses Patriotes (Young Patriots), Solidarite Francaise (French Solidarity League), Federation des Contribuables (The Federation of Taxpayers), and some sections of the Union Nationale des Ancien Combattants (The National Union of Veterans). There was also a group called Camelots du Roi, which was a fighting wing of the Action Francaise. Thorez, who unequivocally states that these groups were intending a military seizure of power in France, says that these leagues were all connected with Redressement Francais (French Reform Movement), directed by M. Mercier, a leading magnate of the Electricity Trust. Thorez generally assumes a higher level of collusion between the groups than other writers do.

The Croix de Feu became the largest group. It was headed by Colonel de la Rocque. A. Werth (an English journalist sympathetic to the Popular Front) did a little investigating into the Croix de Feu and attended at least one meeting about which he wrote in Which Way France? Werth thought the meeting attracted many sincere youth who thought they were fighting for a cleaner, better France. They did not call themselves fascists, but each saw himself as a "disinterested man ready to sacrifice himself for his country, as against the low instincts of the 'parliamentary profiteers' who served themselves and not the country." (Werth, p.70) Here is a lengthy quote which gives a picture of the make-up of the meeting:

Their meeting in the Bal Bullier on June 29 was another demonstration of strength. The two largest halls in Paris--the Salle Wagram and the Magic City--were also filled with Croix de Feu that night. None of them wore uniforms, but there was an unmistakable air of military discipline in the crowd. The people were earnest, well-disciplined and, on the whole, decent-looking people. The elder men, the real Croix de Feu, wore tricolour armlets decorated with a fiery cross with a skull in the centre. The young men wore armlets with F.C.F.; these were the sons of the Croix de Feu. There were also thousands of other people, who were merely 'adherents' or 'sympathizers'.

What class did these people belong to? Except for a few ostentatiously proletarian-looking old men--some of them with wooden legs--stationed in front of the platform, nearly all of these people were middle class and, I should say, upper middle class. The young people were of the fils de famille or University student type--a well dressed and a well-washed crowd. (Werth, pp.70-71)

Werth also writes:

There were other speakers,...They all spoke on the same lines. They spoke about recruiting among the working classes; the Communist Party, they said, was a gang of criminals--qui se ressemblent, s'assemble; there might be some good fellows among them, but they must be won over, and effective resistance against the Communists must be organized... (Werth, p.71)

Later La Rocque spoke:

'You are Frenchmen of the front line. You must know that you belong to an immense force, independent of any party. Before there is a new order of things, an end must be put to disorder, and the idea of authority must be restored. The men of the United Front who call us rioters reason like Asiatics. We stand above patriots among patriots, nous sommes des sociaux parmi les sociaux. All that I want to tell you is this: be on your guard, always be ready to do your duty. Your duty is to serve France. Do it without any personal ambition, in the name of honor and security, for your own sake and for the sake of your children.' (Werth, p.72)

The main theme of La Rocque's campaign was the profiteering of politicians. He had no program as such. He did publish Service Public, "a collection of platitudes with a vaguely Fascist and 'Corporatist' tinge." (Werth, p.73) In discussing the ideology and objectives of the fascist leagues, Thorez describes La Rocque's goals as "a pallid and pirated copy of Italian Fascism and Hitlerism, adapted to suit the taste of the middle-class Frenchman who has been ruined, betrayed, and embittered by the crises." (Thorez, p.148) La Rocque supported the measures one would expect a reactionary to support, including the abolition of the Communist and Socialist Parties. In foreign affairs, he opposed the League of Nations, advocated no relations with the Soviet Union, close relations with Hitler and Mussolini.

After the February 6 demonstrations in 1934, the Croix de Feu grew to about 100,000 members, easily the leading organization of the Fascists, outweighing the significance of the Jeunesses Patriotes and other leagues.

According to Werth, although La Rocque was critical of Doumergue in public, in fact they had close relations. (Doumergue was the head of the National Union government which formed after the days of February.) Doumergue, it later was revealed, tried to use La Rocque to pressure the Chamber and Senate. In October and November of 1934, a constitutional crisis arose. Doumergue proposed constitutional amendments which would enable him to pass various measures by decree (such as the budget). The Chamber and Senate fought these proposals, especially the Left members. The reactionary press threatened to take to the streets again if Doumergue was denied. Blum wrote a series of articles in which he claimed the Doumergue's proposals were little short of a fascist dictatorship. These articles were influential with the Left, but Radicals like Herriot, a member of the Cabinet, were clearly frightened of taking a stand because of the possibility of fascist riots.

Doumergue did not back down, and on November 5, the National Government was on the verge of falling. At this point the forces of the Right apparently made themselves felt in the lobbies of the Parliament, hinting at another 6th of February if Doumergue went down, and the reactionary press virtually called on them to come out in the streets again. But, significantly, Doumergue fell and the leagues did not come out. Three days later they had a demonstration in support of Doumergue by his house with several thousand people attending, where the connection between La Rocque and Doumergue was made clear. La Rocque had a meeting with Doumergue and came out of it saying, "I had a very cordial meeting with M. Doumergue. He already received me many times in the past with great benevolence. We shall remain in touch with him; for the day will come when he can save France for a second time." (Werth, p.91)

The Croix de Feu was inactive for awhile, the new government being unsympathetic, but its membership continued to grow, and donations from industrialists and bankers grew as well. But La Rocque began to have problems of leadership which continued over the next few years. He was not a decisive leader and was ambivalent about what his objectives were. Members of his organization rebelled because of the "missed opportunities." For example, a few members took action by raiding Socialist headquarters and were arrested. La Rocque denounced them, which aroused more discontent and several prominent members left the organization. Thorez, in pointing out La Rocque's "lack of principle," "mediocre intelligence," and "poor war record," also mentions his "indecisiveness." La Rocque lacked the dynamism and confidence of, say, Hitler (La Rocque was a poor speaker) and the kind of single-minded ambition which could have welded the leagues together into a more effective force, or even made the Croix de Feu more effective. Despite vague warnings, he did not seem fully committed to a military seizure of power.

Another prominent organization was the Action Francaise. The Action Francaise wanted to restore the monarchy (not technically a fascist aim) and in political economy seemed to advocate a form of Mussolini's corporate state. Originally it was tied closely to the Roman Catholic Church, but in 1927 Rome condemned Maurras, the leader. (The organization was founded in 1905.) Its ideology was virulently anti-Semitic. Carsten, a British professor, in his book The Rise of Fascism, characterized all the fascist parties in France as too small and unimportant to even be discussed but did give some attention to the Action Francaise and the Camelots du Roi, their fighting detachment. Some observers apparently considered it on a par with the Croix de Feu.

It is difficult to assess with any precision the military strength represented by the different fascist organizations. Estimates vary from Thorez's view that they were on the verge of seizing power in France to Carsten's dismissal of them as fairly unimportant. Thorez held that the Croix de Feu was a proved semi-military organization doing small-scale war maneuvers, etc., with troops in a state of readiness, based on a very extensive course of military training. It was armed with field guns and machine guns and had fifty airplanes. Because many of its supporters owned cars and directors of large transport companies were in the organization, the Croix de Feu had independent means of transportation for arms and troops. In 1936 it had about 200,000 members. La Rocque also sounded very militant and threatening in some of his statements. In Le Flambeau ("the torch"), his weekly journal: "When our hour strikes, we shall rise up with one single impulse. Our discipline and self-control will guarantee the precision and effectiveness of our action." (Thorez, p. 148) In April, 1935, in a speech to his men: "The moment when we shall take power is near, very near. Our aeroplanes will not be seen again until the instant at which we shall try our chance. This instant is approaching. It is said that the police are suspicious, that they are on guard; let us keep them on the alert without respite, once, twice, three times, six times; the seventh time will be the right time. They will be caught unawares. Soon power will be in our hands." (Thorez, p. 148)

Another Croix de Feu spokesman said, "Mussolini needed three years before his march on Rome. Hitler took seven years to become Chancellor of the Reich. The Croix de Feu movement is two years old. It means to take power and keep it

in order to restore France's honour in its entirety." There were many other statements by La Rocque and his followers suggesting their leap to power was imminent. But his actions belied his words, to the dissatisfaction of his followers, and his opportunities came and went without action.

Four of the other leagues could provide significant military support, despite rivalries among them. Action Francaise had groups especially trained for street fighting and could rally 5,000 to 10,000 well-armed and well-trained men. The Action Francaise was also very strong on assassinations. Its paper called on its readers to assassinate various Deputies and Senators, said Blum and Cachin must be shot, etc. There was no evidence that they actually organized such assassinations, though many people blamed them for the later attack on Blum which hospitalized him.

The Jeunesses Patriotes had organized shock troops with bludgeons and revolvers. They had about 240,000 men under the leadership of a deputy by the name of Pierre Taittinger. The Deputy Ybarnegary and Marshal Lyautey were members of it and General Weygand was said to be associated with it as well. They were said to be backed by heavy industry.

The Solidarite Francaise, openly fascist and anti-Semitic, was led by an ex-colonial officer, Major Jean Renaud, and had two or three thousand members in Paris. It was alleged to have a total of 180,000 men. It was founded by Coty, the perfume manufacturer.

The Union Nationale des Combattants, a veterans' organization, had about 900,000 followers. The Federation Nationale des Contruibles, with about 700,000 members, conducted fascist agitation through its journal, posters, and meetings. It played an important part in preparing for February 6. In addition, Chiappe, the chief of police in Paris, was a valuable ally to the leagues until his dismissal after the days of February.

Besides the leagues in Paris, a number of fascist groups rose in the countryside because of the agricultural crisis, among other factors: the Parti Agraire, the Comites d'Action Paysanne, and the Comites de l'Ouest. These groups were less effectively organized, however, and seemed to be disintegrating by 1936.

B. Conclusions.

In summary, in the period 1934-1936, although individually the fascist organizations did not represent a threat, united they would have represented a significant fighting force. If given effective leadership, they could have presented a strong enough force to in turn tempt powerful figures in government and the military, already sympathetic, to actually join with them in a seizure of power by semi-legal means, with the aim of instituting a fascist regime. Thus a united and popular tactical front among the Communists, Socialists, and other sympathetic parties was justified, from a Communist point of view. In addition, the Popular Front did stop the growth of the fascist movement in France when many objective conditions favored it; e.g., the crisis in bourgeois democratic government, the depression, the desperation and militancy of the

masses, the weakness of the PCF, and the rise of Hitler in a bordering country. The last factor must be considered especially carefully. In retrospect, fascist forces faced many obstacles to taking power and perhaps could not have done so in any case. But this was difficult to determine at the time and Hitler's taking power lent a credibility to the fascist movement it might not otherwise have had. The underestimation of fascism, in other words, was not an error the French party or working class could afford to make.

V. Errors in the Conduct of the United Front with the SFIO

However, this does not mean the conduct of the united front was always correct or principled, but only that generally such tactics were called for. The Pact for Unity of Action signed by the SFIO and PCF in July 1934 represented an incorrect compromise by the PCF, for in it the PCF promised to suspend all criticism of the SFIO. The SFIO, whose leadership was also signing the Pact largely in response to popular pressure (certainly not because they had become less anti-Communist), had insisted on this provision. Their National Council urged there be "reciprocal good faith" with no criticisms either in the course of or outside the common action, and no doctrinal controversies to disturb the joint meetings. (Brower, p. 64) The PCF agreed to these points in their eagerness to get it signed.

I would agree that criticism of the SFIO by the PCF would have to change in this period to reflect the actual line of the Party. That is, if the PCF now felt that the SFIO were not social fascists, i.e. misleaders paving the way to fascism, but potential allies in the fight against fascism, their propaganda and education would have to reflect that. But to abdicate their independence as Communists, to fail to continue to explain the fallacies and end results of social-democracy was incorrect. It is perhaps difficult in popular propaganda to preserve the distinction between working with an ally to achieve a particular goal (defeat of fascism), and retaining a party's own overall outlook and objectives which necessarily involves exposure of that same ally's outlook and objectives, if only by implication. The goal of the PCF, over-all, to win the workers to Communism away from Social-Democracy should not have been abandoned even when the PCF and working class was on the defensive, though it may receive less emphasis in the short run. Otherwise the party becomes a partner to social-democracy, as the PCF did, rather than an alternative.

It should be added that at various times the PCF did attack the SFIO when particularly dissatisfied with aspects of the united front. Despite the Pact, some of the private contention between the two groups became public from time to time. It seems that some in the Comintern anyway recognized the contradiction the Pact represented for the PCF. This is a quote from Brower describing the situation:

The Comintern had thus some reason not to be completely satisfied with the first six months of united front tactics in France. The seemingly grave fascist menace had been parried by the Pact for Unity of Action, but on the conditions set by the Socialists. Further, nothing had been accomplished beyond the terms of the pact. There was no common program, no mass movement uniting middle and working classes, no campaign in support of strikes. The SFIO had not proven a pliable partner. The Comintern, in an editorial in the September 5 French issue of Communist International, had encouraged

the French party to overlook minor difficulties in applying the united front tactics. Taking these instructions literally, the French leaders had accepted later Socialist rebuffs loyally and without controversy. Then, at the end of 1934, the attitude of the Comintern changed.

The first sign of discontent with the united front tactics came in an anonymous editorial in Communist International on December 1. The theme of the article was the approach of the 'second cycle of revolutions and wars,' a revival of the 'class against class' analysis. The new militancy implicit in this choice of subject became quite explicit in the treatment of the united front tactics. The alliance with social-democratic parties was approved only as a means of fighting fascism, defending the democratic rights of workers, and delaying war. This 'defensive' operation was definitely subordinate to the 'principal aim' of the united front, which was to 'facilitate the passage of the social-democratic masses to communism.' Therefore, the Communists were never to cease criticizing 'the program, strategy, and tactics of those with whom we have signed the agreement (for a united front).' In effect, the editorialist was recommending that the Communist parties return to the united front tactics of the 1920's. His only concession to the 'new' united front practiced by the French Communist party was to warn that attacks on social democracy should be made 'without any uproar' which might break the agreement! Such contradictory advice was virtually useless. (Brower, pp.80-81)

The article went on to criticize the PCF for having succumbed to the rightest danger in applying the Pact for Unity of Action and of having neglected to "underline with sufficient clarity for the masses the differences of principle which exist between the Socialists and us."

Unlike Brower, I agree with the criticism that rightest errors were made in dropping all criticism of the SFIO and failing to distinguish the Communist line from the Social-Democratic one, even though it might have meant no signed pact for some time. But I do not agree that fighting fascism was secondary to winning over social-democratic workers to Communism in this period or even that criticism of the Socialists should never be restrained. These tasks should not have been abandoned, and the right to engage in criticism should never have been given up, but I do not see them at the forefront of Party objectives at that time. No doubt the PCF had made it more difficult for themselves to carry out a more correct line by having propagandized so long that the SFIO was social fascist. Short of signing an agreement to renounce all criticism, they had difficulty convincing the SFIO it would not be the subject of the PCF's main attacks and polemics as it had been for so long.

Even at this stage of the united front tactics, the PCF made other right errors which I have not covered in this paper. For example, they accomplished the "reintegration" of the CGTU into the CGT in June 1935 at the price of dissolving their union fractions, which, on the face of it, seems to be another incorrect compromise for the sake of unity. But the development of their political line can best be seen in their role in the Popular Front during the next two years.

VI. Brief History of the Popular Front 1936-1938

This is a brief sketch of the Popular Front government from its election campaign in 1936 to 1938. Attachment 1 is a copy of the Popular Front Program.

The Popular Front was primarily a broadening of the united front between the PCF and the SFIO to include the Radical Party, a liberal party with a middle class base. It was, therefore, an alliance between the working class and sections of the petty-bourgeoisie with the goal, at least initially, of defeating fascism.

Its real beginning was probably the July 14 (Bastille Day) demonstration in 1935 which was a memorable show of strength. It was officially called the "Rassemblement populaire of July 14." The PCF initiated it and called on all organizations defending peace and liberty to join it (they were speaking mostly through the Amsterdam-Pleyel Movement). In June, representatives of the Amsterdam-Pleyel, the Committee of Vigilance of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals, and the League of the Rights of Man agreed to solicit the participation of the CGT, the SFIO, and the Radical Party. The participation of the Radical Party was considered to be significant because up to this point they had not even been cooperative in Parliament. However, the Radical Party did agree with surprisingly little controversy. The SFIO was actually more reluctant but pressure from its left wing won the commitment. Perhaps a contributing factor to the cooperative spirit between the groups was that the Croix de Feu had been staging huge demonstrations with well-publicized insurrectionary speeches and articles. The PCF, working hard for unity, put pressure on the SFIO not to alienate the Radical Party with questions about their financial and economic policies in government.

The Rassemblement Populaire was headed by a national committee made up of representatives from the different groups. Forty-eight organizations participated altogether and on Bastille Day between 300,000 and 400,000 people marched on the Place de la Republique in addition to smaller demonstrations outside of Paris. They sang the "Marseillaise" and then the "Internationale." Ten thousand "mandated delegates" listened to the oath, "We solemnly pledge ourselves to remain united for the defense of democracy, for the disarmament and dissolution of the Fascist leagues, to put our liberties out of reach of Fascism. We swear, on this day which brings to life again the first victory of the Republic, to defend the democratic liberties conquered by the people of France, to give bread to the workers, work to the young, and peace to humanity as a whole." People shouted throughout the demonstration, "Les Soviets Partout" ("Soviets everywhere").

La Rocque led a demonstration of 30,000 in another part of town.

The National Committee continued after the demonstration to prepare for the coming election. They developed a Popular Front Program (see Attachment 1) with difficulty, for it had to be conservative enough for the Radicals. The Radicals were supported by the PCF who did not wish any provision in it which might alienate the middle classes. They "blocked" with the Radicals against the Socialists on most issues. The main issue of controversy was the question of nationalization of industrial and financial monopolies and of natural resources. Thorez would only agree to national control of the armaments industry. In the end few of the SFIO's social measures were included.

Having adopted the Program, there were disagreements over its use. The

PCF wanted it to be a basis for a mass movement but there were no developed mass popular front organizations to take it up. The SFIO wanted it to be the basis of an electoral platform. The Radical Party objected to this and was backed by the PCF.

Meanwhile at the end of 1935 the Laval government came to an end, the Radicals finally withdrawing their support of it. He resigned on January 22, 1936. A "caretaker" government under the Radical Albert Sarraut was formed until the next elections. The PCF adopted a neutral stance toward Sarraut at first, though he appointed three conservative ministers to the Cabinet, because it hoped to see the Franco-Soviet Pact finally ratified.

But there was still upheaval throughout France. Leon Blum was attacked and hospitalized by a gang from the Camelots du Roi in February. Socialists retaliated, demonstrations were held demanding the dissolution of the leagues. In foreign affairs the Sarraut government was even more on the spot. Hitler reoccupied the Rhineland, violating the Locarno Pact and, despite a certain amount of talk, the French did nothing about it. Nor did Sarraut dissolve the Leagues. By this time the Rassemblement Populaire received a letter from the PCF insisting it publicly disassociate itself from the Sarraut government.

An intense election campaign followed, known as the campaign of the Popular Front. It received 54.5% of the votes. To many people's surprise the PCF received 15% of the vote, the SFIO remained the same with 20%, and the Radicals fell to 19.5%. The PCF gained mainly in working class districts but also in some depressed rural areas. All three parties agreed to support the strongest candidates in the run-off elections to defeat the Right candidates. (There were violations of this agreement by all three groups in certain cases: 25 violations by the SFIO, 22 by the Radicals, and 12 by the PCF.)

After the second ballot the PCF had gained 62 seats in the Chamber, they now had 72, with 24 won from the Socialists and 13 from the Radicals. The Radicals had 106 seats, losing 51, and the Socialists had 147, gaining 16. Thus began the Blum government.

The working class movement assumed great importance at this point. Up until March 1936 there had been two federations of trade unions, the CGTU (Communist) and the CGT (social-democratic). The workers had been largely inactive during 1935 because there was an economic depression and the labor unions were weakened. They had no collective bargaining, few rights. The CGT had once been a strong organization with a membership of two million in 1919 when collective trade agreements were legalized, though certainly not made mandatory. Almost immediately, 557 such agreements were entered into. But in 1920 and 1921, two events weakened the CGT. The general and railway strikes of 1920 failed with severe reprisals; 25,000 out of 200,000 railwaymen were fired, trade union leaders were arrested, and employers began boycotting union labor. Membership dropped drastically. Then in 1921, the more left elements split and formed the CGTU, which had strong syndicalist influences, though controlled by the new PCF and the Profintern. Membership continued to drop for the next fifteen years. For example, the metal industry had 234,000 union members in 1919, 45,000 in 1936; textiles had 174,000 in 1919, 40,000 in 1936. Overall membership dropped from two million to 600,000 at the CGT's low point. In January 1935, when the two unions amalgamated, they had 1,300,000 members between them, about 900,000

in the CGT and 450,000 in the CGTU. Interestingly, the membership was highest in the publicly employed sector--60 percent of the CGT members in 1927 and 35 percent of the CGTU. Collective bargaining had also declined and the big employers were virtually unlimited in their power by the time of the depression, when unemployment further weakened the workers.

Then on June 4, 1936, Leon Blum took office as the new Prime Minister and was greeted by the largest wave of strikes France had ever seen. Blum negotiated an agreement between the national management association and the CGT that called for wage increases, collective bargaining, and the recognition of unions as bargaining agents (known as the Matignon Agreement). But the workers stayed out. In fact, strikes multiplied. At first Blum resisted pressure to forcibly evict the strikers from the factories, but finally by June 10 special squads of police were mobilized. In the end the SFIO and the PCF leadership combined to stop the strikes which threatened the life of the Blum government. Nevertheless it was August before the strike wave fully receded. The agreements and legislation won were later largely sabotaged and evaded by the employers.

Because the strikes were so significant in illustrating the state of the working class, the policies of the PCF in the working class movement at that time, and the weaknesses of the new Popular Front government, I have included some detail about them from Werth:

There were two big strike waves: first a very short one, before the Whitsun week-end of May 30-1; and then, a much vaster one, which reached its climax on June 7, but took weeks and months to subside. The great strike started, as already said, on May 26, at the Nieuport Works at Issy-les-Molineaux near Paris . . .

That same afternoon a similar strike broke out at the Lavalette factory of automobile accessories at St. Ouen. At the Hotchkiss motor and armament works at Levallois, which were also threatened with a stay-in strike that day, a settlement was reached within a few hours; but strikes broke out in a few smaller works near Paris . . .

During the next three days, the movement rapidly spread, especially in the engineering industry of the Paris region, which came almost completely to a standstill; and also spread to the building trade, including the men employed in demolishing the Trocadero for the 1937 Exhibition. Nearly everywhere the works were occupied by the strikers. (Werth, pp. 292-93)

Werth goes on to say that though the Communists claimed credit for the strike wave, he believes it to have been largely spontaneous, without instructions from the Communist trade union leaders.

Werth's account continues:

What happened at Renault's happened, on a smaller scale, in numerous other works of the Paris area. On Friday, May 29, about 70,000 men were on strike in the Paris area alone--the strike had not yet spread to any appreciable extent to the provinces. The workers demands varied

from place to place; in many small factories the demands were scribbled in pencil on a scrap of paper by an improvised strikers' committee--and while in some works the demands (concerning wages, working hours, or such things as "a litre of milk a day to metal polishers doing work injurious to their health") were of a local character, in most of the works the demands related to wider issues--collective bargaining, the forty-hour week, holidays with pay, recognition of workers' delegates chosen by the men themselves. (Werth, p. 299)

The strikes subsided over the three-day Whitsun week-end (a Christian holiday which is observed in France), but then expanded again, as Werth describes:

During the Whitsun week-end, only some fifteen Paris factories with a total of some 5,000 strikers had remained "occupied"; but by Tuesday strikes had broken out in seventy or eighty new concerns. Nearly all the engineering works--including aeroplane, motor and electrical engineering works, where there had been no strike during the previous week--joined in the movement. At Renault's and Citroen's where the strike was "provisionally" settled on the previous Friday, work was resumed; but the workers were in a state of effervescence and it was felt that the strikes might start again at any moment. What is more, the strike movement which during the previous week was almost entirely limited to the Paris area, now began to spread to the provincial centres.

By June 3, the number of strikers in the Paris area was estimated at 350,000. The extent of the strike was shown by the number and the different types of trade affected: Coty's perfumery workshop; all the chocolate factories; Hachette's organization for distributing newspapers; Hotchkiss; Thomson-Houston; Peugeot repair shops; motor works, aeroplane works, printers, oil distillers, paper mills, cleaners, cement workers, builders, biscuit factories, etc. The drivers of the Black Marias struck and prison vans had to be driven by police inspectors. The C.G.T. in a helpless-sounding note stated that "it did not forget the duties of the working class as far as the provisioning of children, old people and the sick was concerned." There were rumours of a food shortage, and the C.G.T. statement sounded anything but reassuring. In a number of factories, the strikers "imprisoned" the directors and managers. Among these "prisoners" were seventeen Englishmen in the Huntley and Palmers biscuit factory at La Courneuve. Mr. Hart, one of the directors, whom I saw a few days later, spoke of his experience with much good humour; and declared that he would easily have come to an agreement with the strikers, with whom he was on perfectly friendly terms, but for the constant interference of the local Communist deputy, who urged them not to give way. "There were a few nasty moments," he said, "but it might have been worse."

On June 4 the strike movement continued to spread like an epidemic. It was obvious that, in spite of some occasional interference by Communist deputies here and there, the strike was spontaneous and simply spreading by contagion. There were rumours of a general strike, involving railways and other transport, gas and electricity. This however, seemed improbable for two reasons: the transport workers belonged to the C.G.T. and the

C.G.T. would not have welcomed a form of strike which would have had the immediate effect of turning public opinion against the strikers; and the workers were indeed perfectly aware of this danger themselves;--for, since the strikes were not affecting the ordinary citizen's elementary comforts, public opinion was, in the main, sympathetic to the strike movement. Secondly, a general strike is a highly organized thing and the strike movement was spontaneous and without any real coordination. Over the large majority of the strikers the C.G.T. had no control, for they did not belong to it. (Werth, pp. 301-02)

That afternoon, the negotiations between the workers and the employers of the engineering industry, where a provisional agreement had been reached during the previous week, were broken off by the employers, and that very evening the Renault works were "re-occupied." At the same time it was reported--which was reassuring--that the petrol and food transport strikes were on the point of being settled. That was the night on which the Blum Government took office.

Alas! there were no papers on the following day to announce the formation of the new government--except the Populaire, the Humanite and the indefatigable Action Francaise. Owing to the strike in the Messageries Hachette, the newspaper proprietors had decided not to go to press . . . The principal theme of the Royalist sheet was that France was now "ruled by the Jews."

The motor traffic was not much different from the night before; for, although the petrol strike had not yet been settled, it was known that the government was making a special effort to reach a prompt agreement. At a few petrol stations petrol could still be bought at almost double the normal price.

The government was also working hard to settle the strike at the abattoirs that had broken out that morning. M. Salengro, the new Minister of the Interior, had a meeting with M. Jouhaux, the Secretary-General of the C.G.T.; but M. Jouhaux declared that as most of the strikers were non-union, he had no control over most of them. But he promised, at any rate, to restrain the railway men. The most spectacular new development was the extension of the strikes to the Grands Magasins, most of which, including the Galeries Lafayette, the Louvre, the Samaritaine and the Trois Quartiers were declared to be occupied that morning. At the Galeries Lafayette a notice was displayed with the title: "Prostitution or Hospital for Consumptives?" It spoke of the sweated female labour in the big shops, and appealed for the moral support of the general public. I was allowed by the pickets to enter the Galeries Lafayette. The men and women were assembled on the ground floor of the shop; and were discussing the terms they had proposed to the management: respect of trade union right; recognition of workers' delegates; no reprisals against the strikers; no overtime, minimum wages roughly fifty to seventy-five percent higher than their present wages; and better food.

The young girls were visibly enjoying the strike as a novel experience; but declared with a touch of grimness that it was high time they got better food and better wages. Some of them were earning no more than 400 francs a month . . . The strike, I was told, had started spontaneously that morning without any instructions from the C.G.T. or anybody else. But the staff had since asked the C.G.T. to send someone along to discuss the situation with them; and nearly everybody was going to join the C.G.T. now. (Werth, pp. 303-04)

That day, June 5, Leon Blum, the new Premier, made his first broadcast speech. He appealed to the workers to observe discipline and to the employers to treat the dispute in a broad-minded spirit. He warned the people against rumours spread by mischievous commentators, and appealed for calm. He believed in the great future of French democracy.

But this broadcast (naturally) did not put an end to the strikes, and when the Blum Government appeared for the first time before the Chamber on the following day, Saturday, June 6, over a million people were on strike in France. After Renault, Citroen was "reoccupied," and new strikes were reported from every part of the country. Here and there, a few strikes were being settled, but only to be replaced by several others. (Werth, p. 305)

The strikes continued on a large scale right into the middle of June --in spite of the famous Matignon Agreement signed on the night of June 7. The coal strike broke out, as arranged, on the following day; and the rubber and tyre industries at Clermont Ferrand also became involved. On June 11, there was a strike of the hotel and restaurant employees in Paris, and for the first time the town swarmed with alarmist rumours of a Fascist or Communist coup. M. Jacques Bardoux later published an altogether preposterous story about a Communist plot to seize power that night. (Werth, p. 306)

It was about June 12 that the strikes definitely began to subside, after reaching a record of over a million simultaneous strikers. The Matignon Agreement on June 7 had, if not an immediate, still a decisive effect on the strikes. It was hailed by the C.G.T. as the greatest victory in the History of French Trade Unionism;--though the fact that the strike continued on a large scale, even after the Matignon Agreement, showed that the C.G.T.--in spite of its membership which had increased, in a fortnight, from one and a half to nearly three million--had not yet achieved anything resembling full control of the strike movement. (Werth, p. 311)

Besides the Matignon Agreement, the Blum government did enact many progressive social measures in its first few months in office (though many were later watered down or eliminated), fully supported by the Communists and Radicals with whom Blum consulted regularly. Known sometimes as the French "New Deal," measures included a 12 percent increase in wages with paid holidays and a forty-hour week (the Matignon Agreement), a four-year Public Works Plan (implementation immediately shelved, however), creation of the Office du Ble (which took wheat trade out of private hands, abolished speculation, and achieved stable wheat prices), reform of the Bank of France, and nationalization

of the manufacture and sale of armaments. Blum also dissolved the fascist leagues, compelled the newspapers to disclose the names of their directors and sources of finance, and regulated some prices. But the contradictions in the Popular Front government over financial measures when the government asked for special powers to deal with the sharp decline of the franc brought about the resignation of the Blum government on June 21, 1937.

Blum was replaced by a Radical minister, Chautemps, who in January, 1938, opposed by the PCF in a vote of confidence, tried to read the PCF out of the Popular Front. He lost the support of the SFIO who were committed to maintaining the Popular Front. By March, 1938, Chautemps also resigned. Blum formed a new Socialist-Radical government in March but was again forced to resign in April. A new government was formed by Daladier, consisting of "moderates" and Radicals, thus ending the Popular Front government. As far as the two main Popular Front organizations were concerned, the Delegation of the Left was non-functional by fall, and the National Committee of the Rassemblement Populaire was broken up in November 1938 by the withdrawal of the Radicals (after an attempt to expel the Communists), thus officially ending the Popular Front altogether. The main issues which divided and brought down the Blum government were economic policy, aid for Spain, and foreign policy generally. I will discuss the PCF role in these struggles, particularly Spain, later.

VII. The PCF Joins the Popular Front Government Coalition in the Chamber of Deputies

Having looked at the need for united and popular front tactics by the PCF, the second issue necessary to reach a conclusion on is the question of the Popular Front government. Was it correct for the Communist Party to participate in a coalition with Socialists and Radicals to govern France from 1936 to 1938? The weaknesses of Dimitroff's formulations on united front governments and whether they are Leninist or not are discussed thoroughly in "The VII Congress of the Comintern on War and Revolution." Dimitroff's formulations are relevant here as a basis on which to look at the popular front government attempted in France. Whatever their inadequacies, Dimitroff's guidelines were supposed to provide some minimum standard, some limits to the applicability of popular front governments. Dimitroff did not endorse the Communist party of every capitalist country forming or attempting to form a popular front government. At the very least, in other words, the conditions Dimitroff sets out should have existed in France if the PCF were to take part in a popular front government. But this was not the case.

A. The Working Class Was Still Threatened by Fascism.

The first general condition is the threat of fascism. I have already shown what I think the fascist threat was in 1934 and 1935. The internal fascist threat declined in 1936 I believe. The Action Francaise and other leagues conducted violent propaganda campaigns, including the advocacy of assassination, during the 1936 election campaign, but they appeared to be on the defensive. When Blum was physically attacked in February, even M. Saurrat made a strong speech against the fascists and the Royalist league was dissolved. (Maurras was actually sentenced to prison for incitement to murder.) When Blum

took office in June he dissolved the Croix de Feu, the Solidarite Francaise, the Jeunesses Patriotes, and the Francistes. (Technically, the Croix de Feu and others were not even still military organizations because in December they had been forced to dissolve their militias by the government.) La Rocque appealed the dissolution and lost, and his prestige among his followers fell lower. Thousands left the movement, a few joined the PCF, probably more joined the French Popular Party, which was Doriot's organization. The Croix de Feu did resist the dissolution to some degree--it had a demonstration on July 5 which ended in fighting with the police. They threatened more action on Bastille Day but the government forbade them to have their own demonstration.

Actually, what the Blum government did was to authorize one Bastille Day demonstration which everyone could join. The Right participated in it with their own slogans and symbols but there were few clashes, according to Werth. His description of the demonstration and military parade indicated there was still a popular following for fascism but its organized strength was much muted.

The outstretched hands of the Fascist salute mingled with the clenched fists of the Front Populaire salute. "Send the Croix de Feu to Coblenz" (the town where the French emigres assembled during the French Revolution), one part of the crowd shouted. "Send the Communists to Moscow," the other part replied. And then, when the marching military bands struck up the "Marseillaise", Left and Right all joined in a single chorus, but when the last notes died away the old game started again. "Le Front Populaire!" "La France aux Francais!" "Down with La Rocque!" "Down with the Soviets!" (Werth, p.358)

The "disputes" between the Left and Right continued as before. "You Fascists should try to work in a factory. You would soon see how you would like it." When the Fascists retorted, the men of the Left growled, "Be silent, dissolved ones. You no longer exist." (Werth, p.359)

The leaders of the Croix de Feu did reorganize as the French Social Party; they did have some large meetings with a few violent clashes with the Communists and the police. Doriot's French Popular Party formed in 1936 but never mobilized a huge following. Its program was thin, largely based on hatred for Communists, and favored the typically reactionary measures.

However, the external fascist threat increased during this period, increasing the responsibility of the PCF, in my opinion, to defeat fascism's threat to the international working class (particularly in the Soviet Union), and to protect its own working class from an invasion by Germany. I would say, therefore, that it was possible to talk meaningfully of a government in France with an anti-fascist program, of at least supporting a government because it was anti-fascist. Hitler had just re-armed the Rhineland on France's border, the USSR was threatened by an alliance of capitalist powers which could have crushed it, and Spain, as it soon developed, was about to be overpowered by fascist aggression. As Spain was also on France's border, to talk of France's importance in defending Spain against fascist counterrevolution was not idle. No other country could reasonably be expected to aid Spain as much as France. In other words France's role in Europe as a bulwark against fascism was not an empty phrase. And the PCF in France was bound to take this seriously. In this sense Dimitroff's prerequisite concerning the danger of fascism existed in France in this period. For at this point the PCF could not even be sure that France would enter a possible world war on the side of the USSR and not the Axis.

B. The Bourgeoisie Could Prevent a "Government of Struggle Against Fascism and Reaction" from Being Effective.

Next is the question of political crisis. Was the state apparatus disorganized and paralyzed so that it could not prevent the formation of a government against fascism and reaction? The government was in trouble, no doubt. It was unable to solve the economic problems racking France, unable to provide relief for the working class and peasantry, unable to fight fascism either with strong action against the leagues or with a firm policy toward Hitler and Mussolini. It allowed Hitler to re-arm the Rhineland and Mussolini to invade Abyssinia, and it seems evident that at least the former was opposed to the direct self-interest of even the French bourgeoisie. It could not organize itself to protect the franc. Cabinets formed and cabinets fell. It could not carry out a comprehensive program.

But the state apparatus involved more than the Cabinet and Deputies. The bourgeoisie rules only partly through the elected government; it also has the army and the banks. Specifically, it had in France the Bank of France, without which the government could not move. The Bank of France, with all its economic difficulties, remained tremendously powerful, although Blum's reforms made it a little more "democratic." There was no evidence that the army was paralyzed or disorganized or no longer inclined to take orders from the bourgeoisie.

Therefore, I would say that the grip of the bourgeoisie was still so strong, that although it could not prevent a popular front government from being elected (by a small majority at that), it could make sure it had to compromise on every level in order to survive, in the fight against fascism, in its social measures to relieve the working class and peasantry, in its foreign policy. The compromises, in my opinion, were so extensive that the Popular Front government could not be honestly characterized as a "government of struggle against fascism and reaction."

C. The PCF Fails to Lead the Workers' "Vehement Revolt"--the 1936 Strike Movement.

Secondly, were the "widest masses of working people, particularly the mass trade unions" in a "state of vehement revolt against fascism and reaction, though not ready to rise in insurrection so as to fight under Communist Party leadership for the achievement of Soviet Power?" There was unquestionably a mass movement, partly based on anti-fascism and partly based on rebellion against living and working conditions in France during the economic crisis. To some degree, the second prerequisite could be said to have existed. But how extensive was the mass movement in France actually? How vehement was the revolt of the working people? The irony of the situation was that the strongest expression of rebellion by the working class France had ever known, the June 1936 strike movement, was cut off and suppressed by both the SFIO and the PCF to protect the Popular Front government. It is difficult to predict if that "vehement revolt" would have deepened or widened significantly under revolutionary leadership, but it is not difficult to see that it never received any.⁷ If it had, perhaps Dimitroff's second condition could have been more satisfactorily met. It is also significant that the June strikes occurred after the election of the Popular Front government, which showed a certain lack of confidence by the working class that "their" government would improve conditions except under great pressure. In any case, since Dimitroff was not more precise

about the nature of this revolt of the widest masses of working people, one cannot say definitively that this situation did or did not occur in France at the time the PCF decided to become part of the Popular Front coalition in the Chamber of Deputies.

D. The PCF Moves Rightward to Accommodate the SFIO and Radical Party.

Concerning the third prerequisite, part of it at least was true. The Socialists had shown themselves willing to join with Communists in a determined fight against fascism (most of the time anyway), if not against all reaction. And among the rank and file there was at least some leftward movement. The PCF membership was growing dramatically in this period and it received 15% of the popular vote in the 1936 elections, some of which came out of the Socialist vote. However, the united front was organized at least as much on SFIO terms as on PCF terms, which suggests the PCF moved rightward as much or more than the SFIO moved to the left. There was, of course, a more militant left wing in the SFIO always trying to develop a more left line for the party, and who also pushed harder for working with the Communists in some cases. But there was no evidence that they were prepared to break away from the SFIO in this period or that the SFIO leadership as a whole was any less anti-Communist than usual. After all, during the Popular Front period the SFIO was also growing, though not as fast as the PCF, was still much larger than the PCF, and was even more committed to electoral politics, being able to actually head a government.

E. Conclusions.

To sum up, I do not think that even the minimal prerequisites Dimitroff laid out for participating in a popular front government fully existed in France in 1936. They existed partially, and in some formal aspects, but the PCF failed to examine them more deeply, to see in actuality that the class forces were still such that the PCF could not hope to play anything but a compromised, ineffective role in the Popular Front coalition.

Why did the PCF fail to recognize this? Briefly, several factors seem to stand out. The taste of large popular support, of legitimacy, was too tempting. They saw a chance to at least share state power, and probably many genuinely thought that this was an opportunity to win concessions for the working class, to spread Communist ideas, to make the party stronger, and above all, to fight fascism by preventing France from joining the Axis powers (a real risk at certain times) by taking a strong stand against Hitler, by getting the Franco-Soviet pact ratified.

The popular front mass movement by necessity often blurred class lines and subordinated the interests of the working class to those of the "people." Class lines certainly became blurred in Communist propaganda and the PCF seemed to forget that even in popular front times it represented the working class and its interests, which would never be identical to the "people's."

The Comintern had a share of responsibility. There was lack of clarity in their presentation of united front and popular front tactics (as covered in other reports) and they did not struggle against opportunist implementations. Indeed, the popular front in France was considered one of the Comintern's "successes," which certainly reinforced the PCF leadership's right tendencies.

What would have been a correct position for the PCF in those circumstances? Because of the international threat of fascism, I think the PCF could have supported a Popular Front government, even running some of its members for the Chamber of Deputies, as long as that government truly represented a "government of struggle against fascism." But in France, even if such a government were elected, it was bound to have a short life. The fact is that by running for election in a coalition that formed a government, the PCF took responsibility for that government's survival, rather than only supporting it when it waged a consistent struggle against fascism. And it took on this responsibility without having real power to even propose and pass a program. On the one hand, it had relatively little power⁶ in the coalition itself, being the smallest of the three parties, and on the other hand, the entire coalition was governing a France still firmly in the hands of the bourgeoisie's institutions.

VIII. The PCF Compromises the Basic Interests of the Working Class

The PCF compromised the basic interests of the working class, French and international, in many areas during this period. I have chosen three key issues to discuss, issues that reveal the PCF was talking about much more than a change of tactics when they embarked on their popular front policies. One issue was the workers movement and the suppression of the strikes in June 1936, the second was the betrayal of Spain, and the third was the support of French imperialism.

It is important to re-emphasize the PCF's objective position in the Popular Front coalition. It had run on a Popular Front program, it participated in the Popular Front government as Deputies in the Chamber (though not as Cabinet Ministers), and, in effect, staked its future on its success. The Communist deputies were a minority--their votes were needed to pass other parties' measures, but they could not pass their own. If they withheld their support on critical issues, the government would fall, a government they believed essential to stop fascism internally and externally and to ally France with the Soviet Union. The only tactics they could rely on were maneuvering in the Chamber and mass agitation, both of which they employed. But obviously both tactics had their limits.

A. The Workers Strike Movement is Curtailed by the PCF.

The first example of their weak position developed even as Blum took office with the huge workers strike in June, already described. Fenner Brockway in Workers Front summarized the situation in class terms and it is worth repeating though his alternative scenario (not quoted) is incorrect in my opinion. (Brockway was a left wing Socialist in the British labor movement.)

There have been few occurrences in working-class history more remarkable than the stay-in strike movement which swept practically every worker within its scope in and about Paris, and which spread to many other French towns as well. Thousands of workers unattached to any Trade Union joined in; the Paris midinette and bank clerk and factory hand and engineer were all together. They demanded an increase in wages, the forty-hour working week, holidays with pay, the right to negotiate through shop stewards. They announced that they would remain in the factories, shops, offices, and work-shops until their demands were granted. In effect, they took possession of industry.

A united working-class leadership with revolutionary intentions could have led the French workers very far at this point. A wonderful demonstration of class solidarity and power had been given; the workers were in possession of industry and the employing class were helpless. The employers could not even rely on the State Police Force or army to turn the workers off their property, because the election had placed the Socialist Party in a position of political domination. In such a situation bold direction given jointly by the Socialist, Communist and Trade Union leaders--by Leon Blum, Cachin, and Jouhaux--might have carried through revolutionary changes. All the possibilities were there.

But the Popular Front alliance with the Capitalist Radical-Socialists (the Radical Party-ed.) tied the hands of the working class leaders. There had previously been a warning of the crippling effect of this alliance in a strike situation. The workers had come out in several towns in the north. They were in a militant mood. The Radical-Socialists became nervous. To reassure their new allies, the Socialist and Communist leaders, and particularly the Communists, counselled the strikers to be restrained and moderate. This was an early indication of how the price of a Capitalist alliance is the modification of the class struggle.

In the case of the Stay-in Strike Movement, the effect of the alliance was still more decisive. The Capitalist Radical-Socialists were seriously alarmed. It is true that they represented Capitalism in the Provincial centres rather than Paris Capitalism, but the Stay-in strikes were spreading to the Provinces, and there was danger of an all-national class conflict. Leon Blum saved the situation for the Popular Front and his Capitalist allies.

Instead of encouraging the workers to take advantage of their favorable situation to go forward to the social revolution, he counselled them to moderation, to give up the possession of their work-places, to return to work in the normal way. He promised that the Popular Front Government would legalize the forty-hour working week and holidays with pay, and he negotiated with the employers for an increase of wages and for the recognition of shop-stewards. With these agreements in their hands the workers evacuated the work-places and reverted to the status of wage-slaves. (Brockway, pp.153-154)

Brockway exaggerates the possibilities of "social revolution" (It is not even clear what kind of revolution he has in mind), and he simplistically blames the alliance with the Radicals for causing the betrayal of the strikes. The Socialists were compromised as representatives of the revolutionary interests of the working class long before the Popular Front. However, I think his main point is correct, especially concerning the Communist Party--the PCF failed to even militantly pursue the short-term interests of the working class and completely failed to take up the task of further revolutionizing the working class, ideologically or organizationally. This was inexcusable for a supposed Marxist-Leninist party.

The whole influence of the working-class leadership was exerted towards quietening down the workers rather than intensifying their class fight. When they had returned to work, Leon Blum, the Socialist Prime Minister, announced that the Government would permit no more Stay-in strikes. The property rights of the employers must be respected and upheld. Leon Blum's Capitalist colleagues in the Government were satisfied. (Brockway, p.156)

Brockway continues:

When the workers were safely back at their jobs and the first enthusiasm of the Popular Front victory had passed, the employers began their counter-offensive. On an increasingly wide scale they sabotaged the agreements and legislation which had followed the Stay-in strikes. The forty-hour working week was evaded, the full increases of wages were withheld on one excuse or another, the shop-stewards were not recognized. More serious, prices began to mount and wage increases became of less and less value. (Brockway, p. 157)

The PCF did not take an openly opportunist position at the beginning. It supported the strikes which began in May in the metallurgical industries. The strikes were not officially called for by the PCF, but undoubtedly much of their leadership were Communist trade union officials. L'Humanite covered them closely and enthusiastically but said the workers were solely responsible. The May strikes were rapidly won because the metallurgical Unions, Communist dominated. Their main objective was a collective contract which union leaders had long been calling for. Duclos, a Communist leader, was called in on the settlement talks by Premier Sarraut. Duclos urged a peaceful solution and accepted management's demand that the factories be evacuated before negotiations began. He also tried to keep the workers demands narrowed to the demand for a regional contract. Most of the workers did evacuate (10,000 remained in Paris factories) but after the weekend strikes broke out again. This time they spread to many industries, many regions. When Blum took office on June 6, they were still spreading. He asked for calm. The Delegation of the Left, including the PCF, called for a rapid end to the strikes. Blum negotiated the Matignon Agreement, which Frachon, a Communist trade union leader, signed. On the front page of L'Humanite, Frachon then called on the strikers to resume work. The workers did not listen. Squads of police were stationed by factories on orders from Blum. The union leadership, often tied to the PCF, was in many cases over-run or ignored. (Only the Trotskyists, with their newly founded International Workers Party, called for proletarian revolution at this point, and the government quickly shut their paper down.)

Then the PCF moved to end the strikes. This quote from Brower shows how:

The party leadership decided finally to take special measures to meet the critical situation. They were losing control of their followers and could see that the country was in serious danger of grave internal disorder. They began by obtaining from the secretaries of the party cells in the Paris region, brought together in a meeting on June 9, an expression of "confidence" in their policies. The next day, L'Humanite published an appeal to the workers to observe "vigilant rigor" against any "suspicious elements" seeking to upset the "tranquil discipline" in the factories. Finally, a special meeting of the party members from the Paris region was held on June 11 in order to give Maurice Thorez the opportunity to outline the new tactics. The General Secretary rejected completely any revolutionary hopes which the great strike movement might have raised within the party. "To seize power now," he declared, "is out of the question." He pointed out that the middle classes and the peasantry were not on the side of the workers. Showing the Comintern's concern for French unity, he warned that nothing must be done to "dislocate the cohesion of the

masses." The strike movement had to be limited to the "satisfaction of demands of an economic character." Therefore, the workers "must know how to end (a strike) as soon as satisfaction has been obtained." Even "compromise" was necessary "if all the demands have not yet been accepted but if victory has been obtained on the most essential and important demands." He called on the metallurgical workers of Paris to end their strike and disavowed Communists who intervened in strikes. The Communist Party was thereafter unequivocally committed to the peaceful settlement of the conflict. Its motto, proclaimed in bold headlines on L'Humanite's front page on June 14, was: "The Communist Party is Order!"

From that moment on, the Communist leaders worked to end the strikes. On June 13, the Central Committee, presided over by the General Secretary of the Metallurgical Federation, Ambroise Croizat, approved Thorez's call for an end to the strikes in order to avoid "campaigns of fright and panic." The day before, the Paris Association of Metallurgical Unions had accepted a compromise settlement. This example was followed by several other major unions in the Paris region. Within a few days, the majority of strikes in the capital had been settled. Calm had been restored at last, thanks in large part to the authority of the Communist Party among the Parisian workers. (Brower, pp. 152-53)

Where these tactics did not work, as in Lyons and Marseilles, the leadership personally intervened. All in all, the PCF was successful; by August only 4800 workers were on strike. (The union movement grew tremendously, incidentally, after the strikes and so did PCF influence in it.)

B. The Popular Front Government Betrays Spain.

No sooner was the strike question settled, than the Spanish Civil War broke out. And the PCF had the opportunity to justify its participation in the government coalition, the chance to fight fascism. Again, from Brockway, who says, after explaining that both France and Spain had Popular Front governments supported by the Socialists and Communists:

In such circumstances one would expect that if either Government were attacked by their common enemy, Fascism, the other would rally to its support. One would certainly expect that the help normally permitted from one country to another would be forthcoming. Yet, when the Fascist revolt began in Spain, the French Popular Front Government held its hand. It did not even allow the Spanish Government to buy arms from armament makers in France, despite the fact that under Capitalist law and by Capitalist practice this had always been allowed previously. Before this case of Spain I do not know an instance where a de facto and de jure Government faced with rebellion had been refused permission to purchase arms from another country. (Brockway, p. 158)

The explanation is to be found in two alliances in which the French Working-class Movement was involved--first, the alliance with the Capitalist Radical-Socialists and, second, the alliance through the Popular Front Government with the National Government of Britain. (Brockway, p. 159)

Right at this time the PCF was climbing rapidly in popularity and general membership. Membership was 187,000 on July 11, 1936; 6,225,000 by August. It had tripled twice since January. The press had grown rapidly as well and undoubtedly this was attributable to its popular front policies. Not surprisingly, there were some who were not blind to the path the PCF was taking. For example, Andre Ferrat, a long-time Communist, broke with the party in July. According to Brower (p. 59), "he warned his comrades, in his last speech at the July conference, against the 'intoxicating' feeling produced by the immense wave of mass enthusiasm." He protested that popularity was no justification for opportunistic policies of cooperation with the bourgeoisie." But all in all, there was unity in the PCF leadership and no serious opposition to their policies.

When the Spanish Civil War broke out, the PCF continued its policy of national unity and moderation. It did oppose Blum's "non-intervention" policy, and it did support supplying war materiel to the Republic. But it did not make it a splitting issue. In fact, during this period the PCF worked to expand the Popular Front to a "French Front" with an even wider base of middle-class support. (However, the SFIO would not support this effort.) The PCF continued to criticize Blum but was silent on the role of the Radicals in the government, who were even more opposed to aid for Spain.

On August 1, 1936, the Blum government issued a communique stating the French government had not authorized export of arms to Spain "even in execution of contracts made before the beginning of the trouble." (Actually, some arms and planes got through anyway.) On August 8 the Blum government prohibited export of all war materials to Spain and called on other states to do likewise. Around the same time as these announcements Britain communicated clearly to France that if France were attacked by the Fascists for aiding the Spanish Republic, Britain would not come to her aid.

Toward the end of the month the PCF began to step up its pressure on Blum to aid Spain. It was disturbed about a meeting Blum had had with Dr. Hjalmar Schacht, German Minister of the Economy and President of the Reichsbank, at a luncheon honoring him in Paris. The PCF feared rapprochement with Hitler and the Comintern feared it too. Thorez called repeatedly on the Blum government to reaffirm its ties with the USSR in the next few weeks, but to no avail. The Socialists and Radicals supported Blum fully. The pressure on Blum about Spain was probably related to this dissatisfaction by the PCF.

On September 2, Thorez spoke to 3,600 Communists at a Renault plant, assembled on twenty-four hours notice. He encouraged political strikes to support Spain in the Paris Association of Metallurgical Unions. On the 5th and 6th short strikes did occur. They were generally one-hour sit-downs. On the 3rd of September there was a meeting of 30,000 in Paris to hear Dolores Ibaruri, "La Pasionara," speak. The Spanish Communist was received with wild enthusiasm. The PCF was represented by Marty. The next day there were demonstrations of 50,000 calling for "Planes for Spain!" in Paris.

Then on the 6th Blum made his famous speech to the Socialists justifying his policy of "non-intervention", mainly by appealing to France's fear of war, and saying (falsely) that Germany and Italy were observing his "non-intervention" agreement.⁸ He got an ovation.

Throughout September and the beginning of October the PCF attempted to influence the Blum government by building public support for Spain. The PCF encouraged political strikes and demonstrations and spoke against the "non-intervention" agreement. At the same time Thorez said on September 9 that the PCF would continue to support the Blum government and two weeks later it supported the decision to devalue the franc, something it had always opposed, rather than see the government fall.

Meanwhile the Radicals and Socialists warned the PCF that they had to halt their political attacks on the "non-intervention" agreement. And on October 17 Thorez told the Central Committee of the PCF that it was necessary to halt the strikes or they would be used as an excuse to split the Popular Front. However, a month later at a meeting of the Delegation of the Left, the PCF delegates proposed a condemnation of French neutrality in Spain and called for arms for the Republic. They were not supported by the Socialists and Radicals, they held firm, and the meeting was deadlocked.

On November 27 a meeting was organized by the Rassemblement Populaire with the rallying cries of "Blum into Action!" and "Planes for Spain!" Blum spoke to the crowd and called for unity of the Popular Front. He implied a threat to resign. Two days later Thorez reiterated the PCF stand and said pointedly: "the fate of the Popular Front is not restricted to the survival of one cabinet."

Then on December 5 there was a debate in the Chamber followed by a vote of confidence. The PCF delegates abstained, but they were ignored as Blum picked up enough votes to continue his policy. The PCF then verbally expressed confidence in Blum. It had failed to change policy by its limited campaign of mass agitation or by withholding support in the Chamber. It was eager to preserve the unity of the Popular Front. As of December the PCF ceased its campaign for aid to Spain and supported Blum in the Chamber until the end of his tenure.⁹

In conclusion, not only did the PCF fail to lead the fight for Republican Spain, it was actually more backward than many liberals and well-known intellectuals who passionately supported the Loyalists, not to mention a healthy section of the French working class. This was a serious failure; the triumph of Franco brought fascism to the Spanish working class and peasantry and made fascism that much stronger in Europe, as well as putting another fascist country on France's border. This was the very opposite of the PCF's avowed purpose in supporting the Popular Front government.

C. The PCF Supports French Colonialism.

On the subject of French colonialism during this period I found little discussion. It was not a burning issue for the French people or the PCF at the time of the Popular Front, but in retrospect we must see it as important. The stand of a communist party in an imperialist country toward its "possessions" has always been indicative of how principled it is, and the temptation to overlook the imperialism of one's "own" bourgeoisie is tremendous in time of crisis when nationalism is more widespread than usual.

Until 1935 the PCF had supported the national aspirations of the colonial peoples in Algeria, Morocco, Madagascar, and Tunisia. For example, in 1925, 105 French Communists went to jail for their opposition to the Moroccan war. But with the new popular front policies the line changed. In the late 1930's the party still paid lip service to the principle of self-determination but was rapidly withdrawing substantive support.

Brower says the party stopped its campaign for national liberation movements sometime in 1935, making the argument that the interests of the colonies lay with the French people:

The argument, the same as that to be used after World War II, was that France was on the way to being governed by the "people," and that therefore the colonial peoples should accept a "fraternal union" with the French people for the sake of joint progress and resistance to common enemies. Thorez later stated the issue quite clearly when he argued that "the interest of the colonial peoples is in their union with the French people," since the "critical issue at present is the defeat of fascism." They should do nothing which might "encourage the activities of fascism." (Brower, p. 105)

Brockway comments on the change in line as well:

France is the second Imperialist Power in the world--second only to Britain. Historically, French Socialists and Communists have always championed the rights of the subject peoples in the Empire to self-government, and have identified themselves with the struggles of the African and Arab peoples for political and economic freedom. But when the Socialists and Communists entered into an alliance with the Radical-Socialists a new situation arose. The Radical-Socialists would not countenance the encouragement of revolt within the Empire or the recognition of the claim of the subject peoples to political independence. The furthest the Radical-Socialists would accept was the appointment of a Commission of Enquiry into the Colonial question. (Brockway, p. 162)

Brockway goes on to explain how the duties of George Padmore, African representative on the Comintern, were to encourage and organize revolt among the Africans with the view that the next war would provide the opportunity for French subjects to win their independence:

But when Soviet Russia entered into a military alliance with the French Imperialist Government, when a Popular Front Government with a Socialist Prime Minister and supported by Communists became responsible for the administration of French Imperialism, the situation changed. A revolt within the French Empire was no longer desired. It would be a betrayal of Soviet Russia and the Popular Front. Mr. George Padmore and the Negro Communists were asked to stop their activities against French Imperialism. Instead, they must instill among the African population the need to cooperate with French Imperialism. (Brockway, p. 163)

Then Brockway describes a revealing incident in November 1937. Blum was not

actually Premier then but the Popular Front coalition was still operating:

Experience justified Mr. Padmore's fears. In November, 1937, the French Popular Front Government had to suppress "with severe measures" (the phrase is that of the Resident General) a revolt by the native people of French Morocco. The payment to the peasants for their produce had literally reached starvation point, taxation had been increased, the towns were crowded with hungry people endeavouring to live on odd jobs. When riots occurred, the crowds were dispersed by firing, troops occupied the towns, tanks paraded the streets, the leaders were arrested, their organization declared illegal, and the newspaper of the Socialist Party of Morocco was suppressed. (Brockway, pp. 163-64)

As Brockway pointed out, the only reference to the colonies or imperialism in the Popular Front program supported by the Communists was the call for a "Formation of a parliamentary committee of inquiry into the political, economic and moral situation of France's overseas territories, particularly French North Africa and Indo-China." In no way does the program suggest independence or recognize imperialism. At the VIII Congress of the PCF in January 1936 Andre Ferrat, a member of the Political Bureau and "expert" on colonial questions, explained PCF policy on the colonial question. To paraphrase, Ferrat said that the PCF does not demand that the Socialists and Radicals adopt their Leninist view on the colonial question but that they apply their own policy of democratic liberties in the colonies, that they struggle for freedom of the press, for getting rid of the native codes, for freedom of association, for defense of the "North African Star," which was threatened by dissolution. In its manifesto from the Congress the party had only a short passage which said the peace must be defended by the development of popular action with the idea of paralyzing the war policies of Mussolini and in favor of the right of peoples to self-determination. In its own program for the 1936 elections, the PCF's only reference to the French colonies was a passage about the right of unions for all, including the native colonial people.

In October 1936 the Popular Front government prepared a bill called the Blum-Violette law which would have given the right to vote to several thousand Algerians. Up to then only Algerians of French origin and particular categories of native Algerians could vote (lawyers, doctors, university graduates, etc.). Under the Blum-Violette law 20,000 Algerians, about a tenth of the French having the right to vote in Algeria, would also have the right. The bill was rejected by the "North African Star," a nationalist Algerian newspaper which advocated full independence, supported by the Algerian Communists.¹⁰ The bill served as a pretext for a violent campaign by the colonial rulers of Algeria against the Popular Front. The end result was that the bill was never submitted to a vote and never applied, with the acquiescence of the PCF in the Popular Front.

During 1936 and 1937 there were many strikes and uprisings in North Africa which the French authorities brutally suppressed. The most important one was at Metlaoui in South Tunisia where striking miners were fired upon and seventeen were killed. The Popular Front government took no action against the reactionary authorities. On the contrary, the Cabinet decided in January 1937 to dissolve the "North African Star" because it was a "separatist organization

whose actions were clearly directed against France." The PCF, nevertheless, voted for the usual colonial budget.

Four days before the decision to dissolve the "North African Star," L'Humanite said, to paraphrase again, that the correspondents expressed their indignation at seeing the directors of the "North African Star" take the same position as the colonists of the Croix de Feu in Algeria and the fascists in France, against the Blum-Violette bill. Later L'Humanite had a long article justifying the dissolution of the "North African Star" on the grounds it was playing into the hands of the fascists and conducting anti-French agitation. This was to represent their attitude generally toward national independence movements in the next few years. The French Communists no longer supported them in any concrete way.

In conclusion, the PCF failed in this period to effectively fight fascism through the Popular Front government coalition and thus protect either the French working class or any part of the international working class, and it failed to better prepare the working class for proletarian revolution, either organizationally or ideologically. It used its organized strength in the working class to suppress class struggle. It was also guilty of flagrant social-chauvinism in its failure to support national liberation struggles and in its use of nationalism to win mass support.

The Party had accomplishments as well. Partly due to its support, the Popular Front government passed a number of progressive measures including the dissolution of the fascist leagues and improved benefits for the working class. It was at least partly the influence of the Popular Front which ensured that France allied with the USSR ultimately, instead of Hitler and Mussolini. But these were secondary and they might have been equally well accomplished if the PCF had declined to pin its future to the Popular Front government, and through its united and popular front policies in its mass work had agitated and organized for them independently. The PCF might also have been able to build the Popular Front at the mass level with mass organizations, something it was always unable to do because of the opposition from the Socialists and Radicals--rather than sustain a shaky coalition of political parties, which is actually what the Popular Front consisted of.

IX. Notes

1. The PCF's participation consisted of being in a legislative coalition in the Chamber of Deputies (similar to our House of Representatives) with the Socialists and Radicals. On Comintern instructions it turned down a Cabinet position when Blum formed his government, and as a result, never did serve in a Popular Front Cabinet.
2. These statistics and the ones following are mostly from Maurice Thorez's book France Today written in 1936.
3. "Class against class" was the slogan of the international Communist movement representing tactics adopted at the 1928 VI Comintern Congress. See "Strategy and Tactics of the Comintern 1928-1935" and "The Concept of 'Social Fascism' and the Relationship Between Social Democracy and Fascism."

4. Stavisky was a Russian-born financier with a long record of successful swindles, who had acquired not only a lot of money but many connections in the French government.

In 1933 Stavisky was frustrated in two coups, despite his eminence. So he contrived a new scheme, the flotation of fraudulent bonds issued presumably by the municipal pawnshop of Bayonne. A minister in the Chautemps cabinet signed a letter recommending these bonds. Someone got suspicious. About Christmas, 1933, the truth began to leak out. Secrecy pent up in a hundred mouths for seven years burst forth in an angry, scandalous torrent. Stavisky's connection with the bonds became known, and then his police record. He fled--having received a false passport from the police. He rested in Chamonix for a fortnight, hoping the storm would pass. Instead it blew to tornado violence. On January 8, 1934, he knew that he was ruined, and the official story is that he shot himself. But it seems very likely that the police, to keep his mouth shut, murdered him. (John Gunther, Inside Europe, p.153)

5. In August 1933 the Anti-Fascist Central Committee and the World Committee of Struggle for Peace set up at the Amsterdam Congress in 1932 united to form the Joint World Committee Against Imperialist War and Fascism. This movement, known as the Amsterdam-Pleyel Movement, played an important role in exposing the home and foreign policies of German fascism... (Outline History of the Communist International, p. 335)
6. However, Brower feels that Soviet Union diplomatic relations and Comintern policy were still separate in 1934. That is, the new united front tactics were considered applicable in all countries, not just countries the Soviet Union was building alliances with. And during 1934 the PCF remained anti-military and anti-national defense (opposed defense spending by the government and conscription laws) which, in Brower's view, refutes the notion that the Comintern or PCF was merely an instrument of Soviet foreign policy.
7. The June 1936 strikes were not revolutionary strikes, it should be added. They were not calls for socialism or the destruction of bourgeois-democracy. Rather, they were extremely militant actions for more pay, better working conditions, and union recognition, so it could not be argued that the PCF could have then established a dictatorship of the proletariat in any case; "only" that they did not advance that aim by giving leadership which could possibly have raised the level of struggle beyond trade unionism.
8. The "non-intervention agreement" was initiated by France and Britain at the beginning of the war and was eventually signed by twenty-seven nations, including Germany and Italy. Gunther describes it thus:

...the great powers initiated the monstrous fiction known as the "Non-Intervention Agreement" which established an embargo on the shipment of both munitions and volunteers to both Spanish sides. This was an almost fatal handicap to the loyalists. They could get nothing in from France and not much from the U.S.S.R. But Italy and Germany sent great quantities of arms and men to Spain before the pact was signed, and after its signature it seemed that they violated it almost at will. (Gunther, p. 183)

Gunther also remarks:

...The hypocrisy of the Non-Intervention agreement passed belief. Italy and Germany were theoretically part of an international scheme to prevent foreign troops fighting in Spain while thousands of their own troops were fighting there! But little by little the pretense of Non-Intervention was given up. (Gunther, p. 184)

9. The PCF, however, continued to give a tremendous amount of aid to Spain in both volunteers and supplies.
10. The Algerian Communists objected to the bill because they saw it as an attempt to substitute a limited right to vote law (very limited, indeed!) for full independence. This happened to put them on the same side as the colonial rulers (in regard to this bill), a fact which the PCF later used against the Communists.

X. Books Used

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Preamble:

The programme of the immediate demands that the Rassemblement Populaire publishes today is the result of a unanimous agreement between the ten organizations represented on the National Committee of the Rassemblement: Ligue des Droits de l'Homme, Comite de vigilance des intellectuels anti-fascistes, Comite mondial contre le Fascisme et la guerre (Amsterdam-Pleyel), Mouvement d'action Combattante, the Radical Party, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Socialist-Republican Union, the C.G.T., and the C.G.T.U. The programme is directly inspired by the watchwords of the 14th of July. These parties and organizations, representing millions of human beings who have sworn to remain united, in accordance with their oath, "to defend democratic freedom, to give bread to the workers, work to the young and a great human peace to the world," have together sought the practical means of a common, immediate and continuous action. This programme is voluntarily limited to measures that can be immediately applied. The National Committee wishes every party and organization belonging to the Rassemblement Populaire to join in this common action without abandoning either their own principles, doctrines, or ultimate objectives.

Text:

I. DEFENCE OF FREEDOM

1. A general amnesty.
 2. Measures against the Fascist Leagues:
 - (a) The effective disarmament and dissolution of all semi-military formations, in accordance with the law.
 - (b) The application of legal measures in the event of incitement to murder or any attempt against the safety of the State.
 3. Measures for the purification of public life, particularly through prohibiting Members of Parliament from combining their parliamentary functions with certain other forms of activity.
 4. The Press:
 - (a) The abolition of the laws and decrees restraining the freedom of opinion.
 - (b) The reform of the Press by means of the following legislative measures:
 - (i) Measures for the effective repression of libel and blackmail;
 - (ii) The compulsory publication by newspapers of their financial resources.
 - (iii) Measures putting an end to the private monopoly of commercial advertising and to the scandals of financial advertising; and preventing the formation of newspaper trusts.
 - (c) The organization by the State of wireless broadcasts with a view to assuring the accuracy of wireless news and the equality of the political and social organizations in relation to wireless.
 5. Trade Union Liberties:
 - (a) The application and respect of the freedom of trade association in all cases.
 - (b) Recognition of women's right to work.
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6. Various educational measures, such as the raising of the school leaving age from thirteen to fourteen, and the 'perfect freedom of conscience' in the case of both teachers and pupils.
7. Colonies: Formation of a parliamentary committee of inquiry into the political, economic, and moral situation of France's overseas territories, particularly French North Africa and Indo-China.

II. DEFENCE OF PEACE

The methods proposed are: International co-operation within the framework of the League, collective security through the definition of the aggressor and the automatic concerted application of sanctions in case of aggression. Constant efforts to 'pass from armed peace to disarmed peace', first by means of a limitation agreement and then by the general simultaneous and controlled reduction of armaments.

The nationalization of war industries and the prohibition of the private trade in armaments. Repudiation of secret diplomacy and its replacement by international action. Encouragement to be given to public negotiations tending to bring back to Geneva the powers now outside the League, but without, in so doing, undermining the essential principles of the League of Nations, which are collective security and indivisible peace.

The programme further proposes 'a greater flexibility of the procedure provided by the Covenant for "the peaceful adjustment of treaties that have become dangerous to the peace of the world"' (i.e. an adjustment of Article Nineteen of the Covenant) and for 'the extension of the system of pacts open to all, particularly in Eastern Europe, after the model of the Franco-Soviet Pact'.

III. ECONOMIC DEMANDS

1. Restoration of the Purchasing Power abolished or reduced by the Economic Crisis.
 - A. Against Unemployment and the industrial crisis.
 - (a) Establishment of a national unemployment fund.
 - (b) Reduction of the working week without reduction of the weekly wage.
 - (c) Improving the chances of the young by creating a system of adequate pensions for aged workers.
 - (d) The rigid execution of a public-works plan through the combined financial efforts of the State and the local authorities and investors.
 - B. Against the agricultural and commercial crisis.
 - (a) Revaluation of agricultural prices, combined with measures against speculation and the high cost of living, in order to reduce the divergence between wholesale and retail prices.
 - (b) The establishment of a Cereal Board (Office du ble) 'which will abolish the tribute exacted by the speculator from both the producer and consumer'.
 - (c) Strengthening of agricultural co-operatives, and the delivery to farmers of fertilizers, etc. at cost price.
 - (d) Suspension of saisies and adjustment of debts.

- C. Pending the total abolition of all the unjust measures contained in the decree laws the most blatant measures of injustice must be immediately abolished.
2. Against the skinning of investors. For a better organization of credit.
- (a) Measures regulating the pursuit of banking as profession. Measures regulating balance sheets of banks and joint-stock companies. Measures regulating the powers of directors of joint-stock companies.
 - (b) Retired Government Officials must not belong to the Board of Directors of Joint-Stock Companies.
 - (c) Credit and investment must no longer be dominated by the economic oligarchy. The Bank of France must cease to be a private concern. The Regency Council must be abolished; the powers of the Governor must be increased and placed under the permanent control of a council composed of representatives of Parliament, of the government, and of the great forces of labour, and other forms of industrial, commercial and agricultural activity. The share capital must be transformed into debentures.

IV. FINANCIAL PURIFICATION

Inquiry into war profits in connection with the nationalization of the war industries.

Establishment of a War Pensions Fund. (The purpose of this is to spread the burden more evenly over the years in which the pensions will be payable.)

A democratic reform of the tax system--a rapid progressive increase in the income tax on incomes over 75,000 francs a year; reorganization of death duties; special taxes on virtual monopolies, but with the provision that these taxes shall have no effect on retail prices.

Measures against tax evasion (such as the 'fiscal identity card' in the case of bearer securities).

Control of the export of capital, and measures (including confiscation) against the concealment of assets abroad.

(This version of the Popular Front Program is taken from Alexander Werth, Which Way France? pp.233-237)