

# A defence of the United Front Strategy against fascism in the US – a reply to comrade Stephen Kerr

*by Davey Heller 6th November*

*On October 13th I published: [March separately, but strike together! For a united front against fascism in the US! General Strike now!](#). On November 1st Stephen Kerr responded with a critique entitled: [United, but with Whom? An Open Letter to Comrade Heller](#). This is my reply to Stephen. Classconscious.org aims to be a forum for debate to help clarify Marxist ideas and it is this spirit that these polemics are published.*

The debate over the correctness or otherwise of the call I made for a United Front against the threat of fascism in the US raises fundamental questions for revolutionary socialists.

These include, most basically, what are the consequences of the absence of mass working class parties of either a reformist or revolutionary character. What position should revolutionaries' [adopt to] working with, or within, trade unions whose leadership is politically subordinate to the Democrat Party and hostile to socialism? Is joint work permissible, or must revolutionaries strive to establish entirely new bodies of working-class power on their own. What is the correct strategy for fighting the rising fascist threat? Is Trotsky's strategy United Front tactic still relevant in the current context? If so, with whom is it

permissible to work? This is what imparts to our debate on these matters' broader significance.

The most fundamental point that I object to in your reply is the equation of a call out for a united front with a popular front, despite my explicit rejection of such a class collaborationist strategy. A united front is a call for joint organising for a specific agreed upon action, in this case joint organising of defence committees against fascist violence and for a general strike against Trump's planned coup. You continue to insist that this call is for a political block involving electoral support for the Democrats despite my explicit rejection of such a perspective. You get around this obvious fact by stating that even though the call out rejects support for the Democrats, it is in fact "not a united front of working-class organizations but a 'Popular Front' which entails the subordination of the working class to hostile class forces," and one which "is a call to support workers illusions in the very forces which are herding workers behind the Democrats".



Frankly, such a characterization betrays a fundamental failure on your part to understand the tactic of a united front between a revolutionary Marxist party, and reformist

tendencies. Let's be clear: by that definition, Trotsky's call out for a united front in 1930's Germany in the face of the Nazi threat, between the reformist Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the German Communist Party (KPD) by definition, involved joint action with "hostile class forces"! The Social Democrats, despite being a mass working class party, were a reformist trap for the German working class. They had betrayed not just the German working class but the international working class when they voted for War Credits in 1914. The leaders of the SPD were responsible for the murders of Luxemburg and Liebnecht and the strangling of the German revolution in 1919.

To reinforce this let's examine what Trotsky wrote in "For a workers united front against fascism" in 1931.

"No common platform with the social democracy, or with the leaders of the German trade unions, no common publications, banners, placards! March separately, but strike unitedly! Agree only how to strike, whom to strike, and when to strike! Such an agreement can be concluded even with the devil himself, with his grandmother and even with Noske and Grzezinsky. On one condition: not to bind one's own hand"

We all know who the devil is even if we haven't met his grandmother! However, who were Noske and Grzezinsky? Gustav Noske was the SPD Defence Minister who bloodily put down the Spartacist Uprising in 1919. Noske oversaw the Freikorps who killed Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Noske justified the massacre with the words, "Somebody has to be the bloodhound." Albert Grzesinski was the SPD Minister of Interior in Prussia. On May Day 1929 he was involved in the violent suppression of communist rallies that resulted in the killings of over 30 workers.



Barricade in Berlin in aftermath of "Bloody May" massacre of 33 communist workers

Trotsky stated in the same article:

"There is nothing to take back from our criticism of the social democracy. Nothing to forget of all that has been. The entire historical account, including the account for Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg will be presented in time, as we Russian Bolsheviks also presented it finally to the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries as a general accounting for the baiting, slander, imprisonment and murder carried on against workers, soldiers and peasants."

These quotes undermine your central thesis Stephen that it is impermissible for revolutionaries to work with reformist forces in defence of the interests of the working class against the existential danger of fascist attack. Trotsky had no such qualms so long as such work was limited to specific joint actions, that organisational independence was maintained, and that the right of revolutionaries to criticize the reformists was upheld. We must remember that this was for defensive actions to prevent the political annihilation of the

working class at the hands of the fascists. In the light of the history of Trotskyism as a movement, your longwinded treatise outlining why “pseudo-left” groupings and trade unions “are not to be trusted,” is at best irrelevant. You fail to identify where in my call out I call for the political subordination of the working class to these forces. You have constructed a classic strawman argument for the purpose of accusing me of justifying the liquidation of the Trotskyist movement into an alien class milieu.

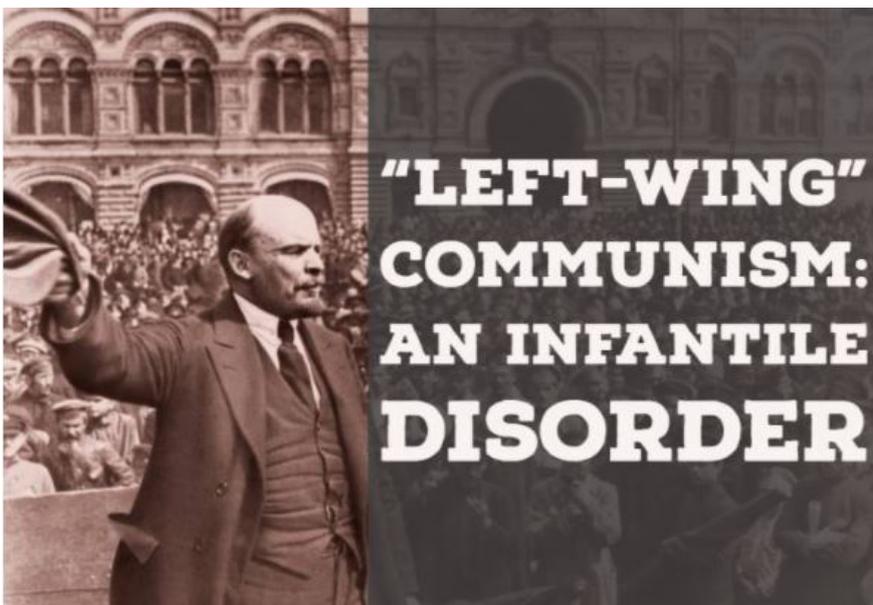
A second major flaw in your argument arises from your treatment of the trade unions. It is worth once again quoting Trotsky at length, this time from his article [“What next: Vital questions for the German proletariat”](#). Trotsky wrote:

““To wage war for the purpose of overthrowing the international bourgeoisie,” Lenin wrote in *Left-Wing Communism*, “and to refuse beforehand to tack and veer in one’s course and to make good use of the antagonism (no matter how temporary) in interests between the enemies; to eschew agreements and compromises with possible (no matter how temporary, vacillating, and adventitious) allies – isn’t that too ridiculous for words?” Again we quote verbatim; the words we italicize in parentheses are Lenin’s.

We quote further: “It is possible to vanquish a more powerful enemy only by straining one’s forces to their utmost; and it is imperative that one make use, most painstakingly, carefully, cautiously and expertly, of any ‘rift’ between the enemies, no matter how tiny.” But what are Thälmann and Remmele under Manuilsky’s guidance doing? With might and main they are striving to cement, with the theory of social fascism and with the practice of sabotage against the united front, the rift – and what a rift – between the Social Democracy and

fascism.

Lenin enjoined that use be made of “every opportunity to gain a mass ally, no matter how temporary, vacillating, unreliable, and adventitious. Whoever hasn’t been able to get that into his head,” he said, “doesn’t understand an iota of Marxism, and of contemporary scientific socialism in general.” Prick up your ears, prophets of the new Stalinist school: it is written here in black and white that you don’t understand an iota of Marxism. It’s you Lenin spoke of. Please let us hear from you.”



There is no question that elements of the trade union bureaucracy and other middle class reformist groups discussing a general strike do so not simply out of a commitment to the constitution, but because Trump’s planned coup strikes at the heart of their political taskmasters in the Democratic Party, and by extension, at their own political and material interests.

However, fighting against the overthrow of the US constitution, the legal foundation of democratic norms of rule, is also in the interests of the working class. Therefore, as long as the principles of the United Front as Trotsky defined them are followed, then it is permissible as Lenin wrote, to make a "mass ally, no matter how temporary, vacillating, unreliable and adventitious" they are. Such a description surely applies the AFL-CIO. Once again, considering the united front principle to the matter at hand, makes it patently clear to me that your long laundry list of the betrayals of the trade union bureaucracy in no way constitutes a valid argument against my united front call.

Also, you make no distinction between the Trade Union bureaucracies and the rank and file members of the unions. There are no doubt that a large proportion of the 8 million or so trade unionists in the US will be outraged by any attempts by Trump to steal the election. Even limited calls for a General Strike will risk very quickly getting out of control of the bureaucracies.

You counterpose work with the trade unionists in defensive and episodic united front action against fascism to the ICFI's perspective that revolutionaries must call on workers to form rank-and-file committees, in defiance of and against the trade unions. The formation of new and independent forms of workers organisations is of course to be supported everywhere it develops. However, if it is going to be posited as a strategy counterposed and entirely in replacement of work within trade unions, it needs to be a strategy that shows real potential to rapidly develop in the coming period to justify the claim that it is of "immense political significance". But you can point only to the formation of three putative "Rank and File Health and Safety Committees" in Tennessee, San Diego and Pennsylvania". Presumably, like the other "rank and file

committees" covered in the wsws.org over the years, these are in fact initiatives of the ICFI itself. The ICFI has not given any details as to how many actual workers are involved in these committees or how they are developing. A similar pattern can be discerned in the ICFI coverage other committees that it has formed in recent years. This is not to say that these committees and initiatives have no significance. But if they are to replace revolutionary work in the trade unions, the ICFI must actually "walk the walk", not just "talk the talk" as to whether these are independent organs of actual working-class power. If one is to make the claim "world historical significance" for them, it is only fair for Marxists to assess how they relate to the overall balance of class forces in a clear headed and objective manner.

Of course this raises the deeper issue of the class character of trade unions themselves. You accurately describe the class role of trade unions by stating:

*"Trade unions are embedded within capitalism and arise out of its process of historical development. Unions set the price of labour and create the political conditions not for class struggle but for class peace – between workers, whom the trade unions manage, and capitalism, for whom the trade unions are really acting in practice. Trade unions are a crucial instrument which maintain the conditions facilitating the extraction of surplus value from the working class. They are not an instrument to overturn that exploitation"*

I am fairly certain Trotsky was aware of these elementary principles when he wrote the following in the Transitional Program.

*“The Bolshevik-Leninist stands in the front-line trenches of all kinds of struggles, even when they involve only the most modest material interests or democratic rights of the working class”.* He stressed that revolutionaries must not adopt a sectarian position of refusing to fight within Trade Unions because of their reactionary leadership.

I am also fairly certain Lenin understood them when he wrote of the trade union leadership;

*“These men, the “leaders” of opportunism, will no doubt resort to every device of bourgeois diplomacy and to the aid of bourgeois governments, the clergy, the police and the courts, to keep Communists out of the trade unions, oust them by every means, make their work in the trade unions as unpleasant as possible, and insult, bait and persecute them. We must be able to stand up to all this, agree to make any sacrifice, and even-if need be-to resort to various stratagems, artifices and illegal methods, to evasions and subterfuges, as long as we get into the trade unions, remain in them, and carry on communist work within them at all costs. “*

Of course, all of these passages must be dismissed by the ICFI as ignoring that the class character of trade unions has changed since Lenin and Trotsky's time. You obliquely refer to this argument by stating that the trade unions have “changed class character since 1989”. According to the ICFI, and in particular David North, the fall of the Soviet Union led to an end to all national based projects which included trade unions. Whilst not disputing that the bargaining power of nationally based trade unions has been undercut by the advent of a globalised production in the last forty years, how does referencing the year “1989” explain how the position of trade unions suddenly became fundamentally and necessarily anti-

working class? How does it alter the truth of your statement "Trade unions are embedded within capitalism, and arise out of its process of historical development. Unions set the price of labour". The connection between the fall of the USSR and the transformation of trade unions into organisations revolutionaries must not work within, and even that workers must be told they have to break with as a pre-condition to political action, is simply not clear to me.

In fact, the line of the North-led ICFI, that a revolutionary orientation to the trade unions must be limited to calling for workers to break from the unions to form new bodies opposed to them, places the ICFI alone among nominally Trotskyist groupings today. In itself this does not make the perspective necessarily wrong. However, considering this in conjunction with the clear position on trade union work in "The Transitional Program of the 4th International", the onus is on the ICFI to back up its novel argument with some air-tight evidence. And this evidence needs to be more than a simple list of betrayals by the trade union bureaucracies, which certainly predated 1989!

Lastly, it is true that the major difference between 1930's Germany and today's US is the lack of mass working class parties, of either a revolutionary or reformist character. However, from the logic of your reply it follows that there no place for the united front tactic in the current context. What then is there for the working class to do? Essentially, what follows from your argument is that the only acceptable line for Marxists to take is to call for workers is to join the SEP (which is difficult and it is a small party lacking in a mass based membership or widespread branches) and demand workers form new "committees" untainted by the stain of hostile class forces. It must be hoped that enough workers will read wsws.org and spontaneously form the nucleus of new independent

organs like factory councils, and soviets, and go on the offensive for socialism! Of course the working class must form "soviets" on the road to workers power. however, they cannot be treated as a precondition to the working-class fighting fascism defensively. To suggest otherwise is to accept in advance the victory of fascism.