

ABOUT THE STREAM, THE EXPERIENCES OF THE MASSES, AND THE VANGUARD

Supporting, against all odds, the unity in struggles and the political independence of the working class.

The masses are not educated by prognostic theoretical conception, but by the general experiences of their lives. We cannot withdraw from the general historic current from the general constellation of the forces. The current is against us, that is clear. I remember the period between 1908 and 1913 in Russia.... Everybody invented slogans and methods to win the masses, and nobody won them; they were desperate. In this time the only thing we could do was to educate the cadres, and they were melting away. Nothing in the world is so convincing as success and nothing so repelling as defeat for the large masses... In this situation the defeat of the People's Front was the proof of the correctness of our conceptions just as was the extermination of the Chinese workers. But the defeat was a defeat, and it is directed against revolutionary tendencies until a new tide on a higher level will appear in the new time... Yes, history has its own laws which are very powerful. More powerful than our theoretical conceptions of history. Now you have in Europe a catastrophe: the decline of Europe, the extermination of countries. It has a tremendous influence on the workers when they observe these movements of the diplomacy, of the armies and so on, and on the other side a small group with a small paper which makes explanations. There is a terrible disproportion between the task and the means... I do not wish to say that we must reconcile ourselves with the impotence.... We must wait and prepare a new element, a new factor, in this constellation.

Trotsky, *Fighting Against the Stream* (April, 1939)

The situation today is very different from eighty-five years ago, when these considerations were formulated.

At that time, the world stood on the brink of a global conflict, with its clear contours already visible on the horizon (perceived early by Keynes¹ and later by Trotsky²), following the Great Depression³, the rise of fascism, the collapse of the League of Nations, the Spanish Civil War, the Munich Agreement, and the widespread rearmament of major powers. The working-class movement could nonetheless rely on significant forces. Firstly, the USSR: the socialist revolution that had triumphed in 1917, had survived a devastating civil war and retained power in a state that spanned from Europe to Asia. Secondly, the labour movement maintained mass parties and trade unions capable of leading significant struggles⁴, despite the rise of fascism in Italy, Germany,

¹ John Maynard Keynes, then a Treasury official, served as a delegate to the Versailles Conference in 1919. He resigned in protest against its conclusions and published *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, in which he argued that the imbalances created by the sanctions would sow the seeds of a new conflict.

² For Trotsky, the rise of Nazism in 1933 was not only a break with a Third International caught between defeatism and social-patriotism (convincing him of the irreparable degeneration of Stalinism) but also an opportunity to rationalize the signs of an impending new conflict. In *The Fourth International and War* (1934), he emphasized how the crisis and the rise of fascism were driving preparations for a new world war.

³ The crisis, as is well known, erupted with the so-called Black Thursday (the Wall Street crash on October 24, 1929) and subsequently unfolded into a prolonged recession, which peaked in 1932–33 but affected the entire decade.

⁴ Particularly noteworthy is the period from 1934 to 1936: the antifascist mobilization in Paris in February 1934; the general strike in Minneapolis, led by the Teamsters and the group that would later found the SWP, which, together with the West Coast longshoremen, the Toledo Auto-Lite strike (Ohio), and the textile workers' uprising (*The Uprising of '34*), marked a resurgence of labor struggles. This momentum continued with the major GM sit-down strike in Flint in 1936 and the steel strikes in 1937,

and Austria, as well as the establishment of authoritarian regimes in Central Europe (Poland, Hungary, and Romania) and the Iberian Peninsula (Portugal and the fascist victory in Spain's civil war). That movement, however, was burdened by significant defeats: the degeneration of the Soviet state, reformist betrayals (from the First World War to subsequent repressions and complicity in austerity policies⁵), and the penetration of nationalist sentiments during the 1930s. Within its organized sectors, Stalinist, reformist, and centrist forces (those that had overseen these defeats) were hegemonic. In that historical context, the global political situation was, above all, characterized by the historic crisis of proletarian leadership⁶.

Today, we are in a season of imperialist friction: the 2006–09 crisis triggered recessions and intensified competition (development of economic zones, trade wars, and military tensions⁷), while the collapse of Kabul and the war in Ukraine have precipitated a shift in phase, with the formation of opposing blocs in the horizon of a global conflict. The deep integration of the past forty years, the availability of nuclear weapons, and the unpreparedness for general mobilization, however, act as a brake on war. Today, imperialist poles are engaged in emerging economic and social militarization, the reactivation of mass nationalization processes, the restart of extensive rearmament, and the formation of alliances, managing potential direct conflicts with the aim of containing them, as in the Cold War. This context is marked by the uncontested dominance of capitalist production relations, following the collapse of the USSR and the development of China. In fact, one of today's main protagonists is a deformed workers' state that has, over the past thirty years, led the most exceptional capitalist expansion in history, with a passive revolution that has unfolded seamlessly⁸.

The working class today is, ultimately, disorganized. In late-capitalist countries, it is divided by categories, professions, and regions; it is fragmented across diffuse supply chains and new areas of value creation (technological, healthcare, and infrastructural services). In recently industrialized countries, it is concentrated but largely composed of recent migrants: its struggles are often still economic-focused, its political consciousness is low and complicated by the role of nationalism, the weakness of the global labour movement, and the scarcity of revolutionary vanguards. In the periphery and semi-periphery, there is a massive urban proletariat (young, often educated, semi-employed, or unemployed), with a circumscribed working class that in some sectors intertwines with precarious intermediate strata, triggering large revolts⁹, repressed with bloodshed or dispersed by nationalist or socially confused political dynamics. This segmented proletariat today expresses a plurality of movements, often sporadic and focused, lacking clear class boundaries and intersected by a variety of political projects: social-democratic, socialist, and reformist organizations have, for the most part, evolved into democratic and liberal forces, weakening or severing their ties with trade union apparatuses and, more broadly, with the working class. Meanwhile, mass unions today have diminished strength and have

culminating in the 50,000 demonstrators who faced off against 20,000 fascists of the German American Bund in New York on February 20, 1939. The year 1936 also saw massive strikes in Belgium (demanding a minimum wage, paid vacations, and a 40-hour workweek) and the Battle of Cable Street in London's East End. There, tens of thousands of workers, chanting *They Shall Not Pass*, stopped 2,500 members of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, who were escorted by the police.

⁵ Mattei C. (2022). *The Capital Order: How Economists Invented Austerity and Paved the Way to Fascism*. The University of Chicago Press.

⁶ This is the opening of *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (1938), the so-called *Transitional Program*, the principal resolution of the Founding Conference of the Fourth International.

⁷ Consider the war in Donbass and the gas agreement between China and Russia (2014); the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) initiated by the USA (2016) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) led by China (2022); China's military buildup and its chain of artificial islands in the South China Sea; the U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations around Taiwan; and the tech embargo (started in 2016 with ZTE, extended in 2018, and later escalated in 2019 with Huawei and in 2022 with the Chips Act).

⁸ *Il dragone e la suo ombra*. ControVento 3/ottobre 2023, pag 16-21.

⁹ In the last fifteen years, we can recall the Arab Spring (2010–12); the fuel protests (2019–20) and the *Women, Life, Freedom* movement (2023) in Iran; the Gezi Park protests (2013); the anti-cost-of-living protests in Sudan (2018–19); the Algerian HIRAK (2019–20); the October 17th movement in Lebanon (2019–20); the Chilean *Estallido Social* (2019–20); protests in Colombia (2019–20); the October Tishreen movement in Iraq (2019–21); the price riots in Kazakhstan (2022); the bread revolt in Sri Lanka (2022); the revolt of the disenfranchised in Peru (2022–23); and the student revolt in Bangladesh (2024).

sometimes transformed into subsidiary structures serving production. The Stalinist, centrist, or generally antagonistic camp has thus been reduced to a vanguard, at times significant but often lacking roots, with confused and contradictory programs. In this context, the current situation is primarily characterized by the historical crisis of proletarian organization, fragmented on both political and social levels-

In these different phases, **two continuities emerge.**

Firstly, the general crisis and inter-imperialist competition have fostered the development of reactionary movements, rooted in the fear of the middle classes, a critique of the ruling classes, and an aspiration for a different management of the crisis (without challenging the foundations of this mode of production). This right-wing faction, nationalist in character but not conservative, has become capable of garnering support even from the proletariat and, in some cases, from organized sectors of the working class. Unlike the 1920s and 1930s, however, this right-wing does not play a directly anti-worker role, largely due to the disorganization of labour. As a result, it has not developed a paramilitary dimension or relied on street violence. Faced with the collapse of the ruling classes' hegemonic capacity, it offers the illusion of an alternative, implements repressive measures and authoritarian crackdowns, militarizes society, and, when necessary, recentralizes certain economic spheres in a Bonapartist manner without threatening the relations of production.

Secondly, in both these periods the isolation of communist, revolutionary, and internationalist vanguards becomes evident. These groups often stand in opposition to the broader experiences of the masses and, at times, even to the larger social vanguard. However, today's disorientation is not due to recent failures in "storming the heavens," the prospect of a gradual improvement in living conditions (the apparent reasonableness of democratic and reformist paths), or the credibility of oscillating political proposals (the presence of reference points steering alternately toward vanguardist strategies¹⁰ or interclass alliances¹¹). The issue, therefore, is not the irrelevance of a revolutionary proposal. On the contrary, the unsustainability of current social relations is increasingly evident, due to the inability to restart stable economic expansion, the widening of inequalities, the potential resurgence of a global war, and the environmental crisis, which threatens the survival of our species (as well as many others). The general rationale for revolutionary change is, in fact, more comprehensible and relatable today than in past periods. Radical slogans, demands, and representations aiming at a transformation of the existing order are spreading widely, both in mass movements and even in common sense discourse. In a period of disorganization within the working class, faced with a new reactionary and mass-based right wing, the isolation experienced today by communist and revolutionary vanguards primarily concerns the *real movement that abolishes the existing state of things*. Certainly, one could argue that it is precisely in the divergences regarding praxis that the challenging mass understanding of a communist and revolutionary program is evident. What has, in fact, become part of *common sense* is the current crisis of capitalism and the need for a radical transformation. This refers to the same generic anti-capitalist impulse that arises from the internal conflicts within production relations, in the clash between those who appropriate surplus value and those who strive to defend not only their wages but also their health, self-determination, life rhythms, and autonomy from the production of capital. This anti-

¹⁰ As was the case with the *Third Period policy*, decided at the VI Congress of the Comintern (1928), which held that a new crisis would drive mass radicalization, inevitably ushering in a revolutionary phase where the main adversary would be the reformists (labeled "social fascists"): this was the line that guided the KPD during the rise of Nazism, rejecting any United Front with social democracy, convinced that Hitler's rise to power would trigger the ultimate confrontation and the victory of the revolution..

¹¹ As was the case with the policy of the Popular Fronts, decided at the VII Congress of the Comintern (1935) following the Nazi victory in 1933 and the events of February 1934 in France, which called for broad alliances not only with workers' movement parties but also with democratic forces. This approach involved renouncing transitional demands and processes of political radicalization to avoid breaking the alliance, focusing instead on managing small or large progressive reforms compatible with the reproduction of the system. This line shaped the Blum government in France (1936–37) and the Caballero-Lopez governments in Spain (1936–39), influenced the development of national liberation fronts in subsequent decades, and more recently inspired coalitions and governments formed against the right. Examples include the "Alliance of Progressives" in 1994 and "The Union" in 2006 against Berlusconi in Italy, as well as NUPES and the New Popular Front against Le Pen in France in recent years.

capitalist impulse is a foundational element of revolutionary processes, but a communist project goes beyond this: it aims for the transition to a socialized mode of production through the exercise of political power¹². However, the disorganization of the working class and the mass experience make this perspective abstract today, especially due to the absence of two forms of praxis that could channel anti-capitalist resistance into the terrain of transforming this mode of production: the political independence of the working class and the united front of class and mass struggle.

The first casualty of the disorganization of the working class is the awareness of the opposing collective interests of labour and capital. The experiences of the masses in recent years have led them to focus on confined and partial identities, while the desire of the broader vanguard to regain a mass dimension pushes it to embrace, if not encourage, the broadest possible inclusion in mobilizations. As a result, the preference is to outline new inclusive dialectics in the relationship between master and servant: a single *multitude against the Empire, people* against leaders, individuals against the *system*, subordinated nations against dominant poles. This means isolating one aspect of the capitalist hierarchy, detaching it from the structure that gives it meaning, and absolutizing it, in a *flawed* repetition of Gramsci's concept of the social bloc¹³. Thus, on the social level, movements tend to develop that are focused and capable of appealing to a broad (one might even say *multitudinous*) audience, precisely because they concentrate on a single aspect of social relations and bring together various components around it¹⁴. These movements tend to interpret *convergence* as merely an aggregation of paths ("*walking together*"), because they are not inherently capable of reconstructing a shared understanding of society: it would deconstruct and recompose them along the lines of dominant social relations. They tend to interpret the logic of *intersectionality* as simply the intersection of various forms of oppression, rather than as the result of the subsumption of different subordinations within the social relations of this mode of production. Thus, on the political level, *conjunctural alliances* tend to develop, aimed at achieving an electoral result rather than pursuing social change. In the mass dimension, this attitude results in the construction of *large democratic and popular fronts*, while in the vanguard dimension, it leads to the creation of *makeshift coalitions* to overcome the electoral threshold. Both aim to defeat the current Enemy (the Right, Berlusconi, Bipolarism, the System), without addressing the issue of how these alliances would function afterward. This was in France with the *Democratic Front*¹⁵, the *New Popular Front*¹⁶ and the *France Insoumise*¹⁷; this was in Italy yesterday for the *Unione* [*the progressive alliance against Berlusconi at the 2006 political elections, with Rifondazione Comunista in it*] and today for *Campo largo* [*the Wide field, the current name for the broad alliance between the Democratic Party, the Five Star Movement, centrist forces, and left-wing reformists*]; this was too in Italy for some leftist alliance, yesterday *Rivoluzione civile* [*Civil Revolution, an electoral cartel at the political election in 2013, led by a famous anti-mafia prosecutor and that collected Rifondazione, PCI, the Green and social movements; it gained 2,3% of the vote*] and today *Pace Terra Libertà*

¹² Exactly as occurred during the transition to the capitalist system: as Marx observes in the first book of *Capital*, this transition was enforced through a political power that both freed labor power (enclosures) and subordinated it within the production process (labor laws), shaping the so-called invisible hand of the market.

¹³ *Flawed*, because it does not rely on an analysis of its diverse subjectivities and interests, nor does it politically outline their potential alliance in a transformative process. Instead, it invokes a shared belonging based on a common opposition to an alleged absolute dominus, which becomes a collective identity that overrides all differences.

¹⁴ Using Marxian language, one could say diverse subjectivities *in themselves*, that is, fractions of different classes that do not acquire subjectivity *for themselves*, a collective awareness of their condition within production relations. This is precisely because they develop collective practices that differ from their own social identities.

¹⁵ Born as a barrier against Le Pen, it succeeded in containing her influence in Parliament (even if *Rassemblement National* gained 33.2% and over 10 million votes), resulting in the election of a large number of Macronist deputies (99), moderates (33), and conservatives (26). This led to the right-wing Bernier government, which relies precisely on Le Pen's non-opposition.

¹⁶ The *New Popular Front* brings together, as its predecessor did, social-liberal sectors (a large part of the French Socialist Party, the Greens) with left-wing forces (LFI, PCF, etc.). The tensions within it are evident, as seen with the Union Populaire and NUPES, which dissolved due to differences over Ukraine and European policies.

¹⁷ This political formation, in some ways centered around its leader (Jean-Luc Mélenchon), has a more complex dynamic than is often believed, as seen in the vote on the war in Ukraine in the new European Parliament.

[*Peace, Land and Liberty; an electoral list at the last European election, led by a famous Tv journalist and talk show host and that collected Rifondazione Comunista and others little organization, like Mera25; it gained 2,2% of the vote*]. One gets excited in the moment of finding oneself, without thinking about the outcomes, and then easily forgets them¹⁸.

The second victim of this season is the united front. The disorganization of labour, the absence of large left-wing political forces, and the degeneration of trade unionism (CISL and UIL, but also CGIL) distort the developmental processes of movements. The confederate organizations present themselves as the only real subjects, and thus develop an identity-driven and competitive action, in which the protagonism of trade union structures is promoted rather than the representation and workplaces¹⁹. The CGIL, the only mass organization on the left, even when coordinating, exerts the weight of its size²⁰. The rest of the left, even without mass influence, replicates this attitude. Far from convergence, each subject builds its own agenda, often self-representing as the founding link for the next recomposition. While movements are being formed that are narrowly focused but lack clear social boundaries (from *Fridayforfuture* to *Nonunadimeno*), while interclassist democratic alliances are taking shape, the mobilization side is increasingly marked by sectarianism, minority positions, and vanguardism²¹. The united front is often defined as *a structure of political polarization, a means of coordination and mobilization among trade unions and class forces, based on a common, unitary, class-based platform of demands to guide workers' struggles. It is a front that involves grassroots unions, activists, and union representatives who identify with an openly confrontational position and reject the politics of national unity and collaboration with the bourgeoisie in managing the crisis*²². This is not the united front envisioned in the early 1920s: in a context where *the world economic crisis is worsening; unemployment is growing; in almost every country international capital has gone over to a systematic offensive against the workers... there is a new mood among the workers – a spontaneous striving towards unity, which literally cannot be restrained... The new layers of politically inexperienced workers just coming into activity long to achieve the unification of all the workers' parties and even of all the workers' organisations in general, hoping in this way to strengthen opposition to the capitalist offensive*²³. The united front is therefore explicitly conceived as unity in action among all left-wing political forces and trade unions of all orientations, bringing together the working class against employer offensives (and later the reactionary right), without erasing organizational structures and programmatic differences, but building a common ground where these can confront and compete. Revolutionary communists, that is, see themselves as part of a minority vanguard

¹⁸ Take, for example, the French Popular Front in the '30 years. In memory, there are the massive demonstrations of February in the 1934, the electoral victory in the 1936, the Blum government and its achievements (40-hour workweek, paid vacation, collective bargaining). What is less remembered is that these policies, without a significant increase in public spending, boosted income distribution in favor of big capital, at the expense of the middle classes, undermining the very stability of the Popular Front. These facts were pointed out by in that years bt the economist *Michal Kalecki*, who anticipated many Keynesian ideas from a labor perspective rather than a liberal one [see [Kalecki, Michal \(1938\) "The Lessons of the Blum Experiment", *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 189, pp. 26-41](#)]. Thus, the Blum government fell after a year, was replaced by a brief government led by the Radical Party, and then the return of the conservative right.

¹⁹ One only needs to scroll through photos of demonstrations and strikes from these years, with processions and squares compartmentalized by colors, in the substantial absence of banners from companies, factories, schools, and universities. Similarly, the ability to promote grassroots initiatives has now disappeared: i.e. the self-organized union initiative led by RSU (*unified union structures at workplaces*: not individual delegates, but the majority of the union structure within a workplace).

²⁰ One only needs to think about the experience of "Via Maestra" [a wide social alliance promoted by CGIL in the last two years] or the building of initiatives against the war: within a formally united framework, privileged referents were identified, as part of a broader dialogue with the Catholic world (i.e. ACLI and the Community of Sant'Egidio).

²¹ From the opposing strikes of grassroots trade unions to the conflict between student movements, from the multiplication of autumn protests to the lack of common initiatives even during international summits (such as the G7 in Fasano). The surreal episode of the clashes with Lotta Comunista last spring also fits into this framework, with the unfounded accusation of Zionist complicity, the attempt to exclude it from universities, and its futile muscular reaction.

²² "*For a united front of the working class*," *Fronte della Gioventù Comunista*, May 4, 2020, a document that explicitly and clearly formalizes concepts widely shared in much of the Italian political and social left, beyond the theoretical frameworks of reference..

²³ *Theses on the united front*, Comintern Executive Committee, december 1921.

acting to win the majority of an entire class.²⁴ The problem, of course, is that this tactic, developed in the 1920s and supported by the Left Opposition against the rise of Nazism in the early 1930s, was conceived in an organized working-class movement, where large trade unions and reformist parties dominated, along with communist organizations with mass influence and significant centrist currents and parties.²⁵ Today, the problem is that disorganization and the multiplicity of the class dominate: there is a *multitude* of labour. Yet, we believe that precisely in this context, the united front, this united front of the masses, gains new and important significance. It allows, in social conflict, to weave together that collective representation of labour that is currently lacking, with an awareness of the articulation and diversity of viewpoints that exist within the class as a whole.

In summary, the spontaneous reaction to employer and reactionary offensives is rightly one of unity. However, today this sentiment is directed towards the creation of short-term political expressions, while within social practices, their programmatic, identity-based, and social partialities emerge. On this crucial aspect, we are currently swimming against the tide, both in relation to mass perception and the practices of the broad vanguard. In a determined and contrary direction, we are therefore patiently working to reweave the reasons for a political perspective centered on class unity and its independence, trusting that within the historical current, a new factor will emerge and changes mass perceptions and experiences.

²⁴ Any party which mechanically counterposes itself to this need of the working class for unity in action will unfailingly be condemned in the minds of the workers... For those who do not understand this task, the party is only a propaganda society and not an organization for mass action.. Trotsky, *On the United Front*, march 1922.

²⁵ See Trotsky's 1922 writing referenced earlier, in which he recalls that *In cases where the Communist Party still remains an organization of a numerically insignificant minority, the question of its conduct on the mass-struggle front does not assume a decisive practical and organizational significance. In such conditions, mass actions remain under the leadership of the old organizations which by reason of their still powerful traditions continue to play the decisive role ... Similarly the problem of the united front does not arise in countries where – as in Bulgaria, for example – the Communist Party is the sole leading organization of the toiling masses.*