**From revolutionary possibility to fascist defeat:
The French Popular Front of 1936-38**

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[Marx’s] theory is a summing up of experience, illuminated by a profound philosophical conception of the world and a rich knowledge of history.

Lenin, *The State and Revolution*[[1]](#endnote-2)

The cumulative experience of working class struggles stretching over two and a half centuries has created a history rich in lessons for activists of each new generation of fighters. Marxists, reformists, academic historians and the bourgeois media draw on this history to strengthen political arguments. Today, in the context of new stirrings of support for socialism in the English-speaking world, debates about how to build a new radical, workers’ movement, how to win reforms and even to challenge capitalism inevitably draw on past experience.

As Eric Hobsbawm argues in his book *On History*, history can tell us “what problem we will have to solve”.[[2]](#endnote-3) If your goal is the self-emancipation of the working class, the problems which need addressing when drawing conclusions about any particular struggle include: did this struggle build working class unity, self-confidence and a class conscious view of themselves and their enemies? For instance, Rosa Luxemburg wrote of the mass strikes in the 1905 revolution in the Russian empire: “The most precious, lasting, thing in the rapid ebb and flow of the wave [of mass strikes] is its mental sediment: the intellectual, cultural growth of the proletariat, which proceeds by fits and starts, and which offers an inviolable guarantee of their further irresistible progress in the economic as in the political struggle”.[[3]](#endnote-4) On the other hand, historians who reject the goal of revolution and the destruction of the state in favour of a strategy of radical reforms assess historical struggles much differently – for instance, they’re more likely to emphasise whether the movement brought a left wing government to power, rather than the development or not of class consciousness.

So it is not surprising that in the political battles between reformists and revolutionaries, interpretations of history play an important role. History can at least indicate what to expect – likely obstacles, what is necessary to win – even though, as Hobsbawm went on to add, it can’t help us predict every contour of future struggles. This is not a straightforward question of formulaic answers to past, present or future problems; it is not a question of taking a template from the past to apply to today. No new situation is an exact repeat of something in the past. Questions of comparison and interpretation are not always easily settled, and new historical research can challenge old analysis and pose new questions. Facts are not self-evident markers. Which facts are more important than others? So for instance, Hobsbawm, in *On History*, proclaims that “historians are the memory bank of experience”,[[4]](#endnote-5) but how does he sum up the experience of the twentieth century in his *Age of Extremes*? He hardly mentions the factory workers or the soviets in his account of the Russian Revolution, some of the central actors in the overthrow of the monstrous tsarist regime and the creation of the first workers’ state in history. And as Chris Harman says:

This is no isolated aberration. The working class is the great missing link throughout Hobsbawm’s book. It hardly appears at all in the first half of the book, and finally makes its appearance towards the end to be discussed solely in terms of lifestyle... There are no references to such key expressions of working class power in the 20th century as the Spanish CNT, the American CIO, the French CGT, the Central Budapest Workers Council; the Polish Solidarnosc is mentioned once. From this history you would never imagine that the occupation of factories was a key turning point in post First World War Italian history or the sit-ins of June 1936 in 1930s French history. Even the huge concentrations of workers which characterised much of 20th century capitalism are missing: the River Rouge plant, Renault Billancourt, FIAT Mirafiori, the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk.[[5]](#endnote-6)

Hobsbawm’s book, widely used in universities, is promoted as a Marxist text, contributing to the marginalisation of Marxism as the theory and practice of the working class struggle for power. You can find no guidance there when assessing the French Popular Front of 1936. Rather than this work serving as a memory bank of the working class, it is one of forgetting. This is an extreme case. But reformist histories invariably manifest this type of amnesia, because struggles are assessed in terms of whether or not they contributed to or undermined attempts by politicians to achieve their goal of the “exercise of power” (i.e. winning parliamentary office), as Léon Blum, the Socialist Party leader of the French Popular Front government put it.

I will argue that reformists today rely on a very limited, and indeed, misleading interpretation of the Popular Front in France from 1934 to 1938 in order to bolster their arguments to back Democratic Party politicians such as Bernie Sanders. They are inspired by the election of the Socialist, Léon Blum, but pay little attention to understanding why a mass upsurge of strikes of revolutionary proportions was not sustained, and indeed, ended with fascism, so their arguments cannot contribute to building the kind of movement needed to fundamentally change society.

## Interpreting history today

We are witnessing the emergence of new support for socialism in the English-speaking world. And a new left reformist current, especially in the US, with *Jacobin* as its ideological centre, has put interpretations of history on the agenda. Their support for the Stalinist Communist Parties’ popular front strategy of class collaboration in the 1930s poses a question which has divided Marxists from reformists since Marx’s *Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League* in 1850. In that speech Marx argued that the key lesson of the 1848-49 revolutions in France and Germany was that workers, and in particular their leading party, must not for one minute doubt “the necessity of an independently organized party of the proletariat”.[[6]](#endnote-7)

The popular fronts broke with this tradition, established by Marx and carried forward by Lenin and the Bolsheviks into the early, revolutionary, Comintern. Until the 1930s, Marxists took it as a matter of principle that workers’ organisations should not form alliances with bourgeois parties. Principles are not just abstractions, but are established through experience. And the tragic outcome of all of the popular fronts entered into by the Communist Parties in the 1930s confirm that this is a principle which should be upheld.

However, left reformists in the US today are attempting to rehabilitate the strategy of electoral class alliances to justify their own political strategy of campaigning for Democratic Party candidates. They either ignore or dismiss the principle of workers’ independence from bourgeois parties as an abstract shibboleth. In their view, this relic of the past needs to be junked in order to relate to the newly emerging sympathy for socialism. The problem is they aren’t replacing outdated principles or shibboleths with something new and creative. They’re merely recycling the Stalinist approach of class collaboration. And the Popular Front government in France is the archetypal example proving that this strategy is a recipe for defeats and demoralisation.

To promote the popular front as a model for today, reformist writers focus on high points of popular struggle in which the CP participated while promoting cross-class alliances. But they have to brush over the ultimate outcomes which, rather than maximising the potential of such struggles, contributed to catastrophic disasters. For instance, the Spanish Popular Front ended with the establishment of the fascist dictatorship of Franco in 1939, just two years after workers’ power had been on the agenda.

In 2016 Mitchell Abidor set the standard. In an article in *Jacobin* he declared that “[i]n French Popular Front leader Léon Blum we find both the grandeur and misery of interwar social democracy”. The misery is dealt with by rightly criticising Blum’s refusal to give support to the Spanish Popular Front government under threat of defeat by Franco’s fascist troops. But Blum’s failure is not explained as the predictable capitulation to bourgeois politics we should expect of reformist politicians, but simply Blum’s individual failure. He concludes that Blum “opted for reasons of state over socialist solidarity and his moral sense”. Abidor gives no critique of the predictable failure of the alliance with the bourgeois Radical Party, adding not to a store of necessary knowledge for any new workers’ socialist movement, but to the conscious forgetting which permeates reformist histories.[[7]](#endnote-8)

In an article in 2017, Joseph M. Schwartz, national vice-chair of the Democratic Socialists of America, and Bhaskar Sunkara, editor and publisher of *Jacobin*, claimed that the communist parties became “tribunes for socialism and the best organizers” by promoting the class collaboration of the popular front.[[8]](#endnote-9) First, how could a party which held up Stalin’s brutal dictatorship as their vision of Communism be a tribune for any vision of human liberation? Second, and factually, the outcome of the popular front strategy in the US, even within the framework of a reformist view, was disastrous for the American working class. As Charlie Post replied, “[t]he Communist Party’s 1930s popular front strategy weakened the labor movement”. All it did was empower the bourgeois Democratic Party, no friend of the working class, when there had been the possibility of significant and lasting reforms as well as the creation of a serious workers’ organisation. Post concludes his critique of Schwartz and Sunkara: “I embrace their call for engaging in both socialist education and the hard work of building resistance to capital in workplaces and communities... The popular front strategy won’t get us there, though”.[[9]](#endnote-10)

More recently, the British journalist Paul Mason has promoted the popular front as the way to ensure Jeremy Corbyn’s defeat of Boris Johnson. He repeats the dishonest practice of ignoring the actual outcome of the popular fronts of the 1930s. His summary of why Corbyn should form a popular front is simply that the “‘popular front’ against fascism...paid off within six months. In Spain...the Popular Front took power in January 1936. In May that year the Popular Front won in France, giving the country its first socialist prime minister”.

Further, in order to legitimise his argument with a left wing Labour readership, he also misrepresents the history of the British Labour Party: “Nye Bevan and Stafford Cripps, two key figures on the Labour left, advocated an electoral pact including Communists, Liberals and anti-fascist Tories... So the popular-front tactic is not some piece of niche, retro-leftist memorabilia. It is the property of the western democratic tradition; the only tactic that halted or delayed the march to fascism in the 1930s. And it was invented by the Corbynistas of their day”.[[10]](#endnote-11) Bevan and Cripps were not the first advocates of the popular front. They were part of a small minority won over by the Communist Party which had members working as entrists in the BLP. In 1938 Sir Stafford Cripps made no secret of what a popular front would mean, unlike the modern day *Guardian* writer. It was “worth the abandonment for the time being of the hope of working class control”[[11]](#endnote-12) and Bevan and Cripps were expelled for their efforts. As in Australia, the vast majority in the Labour Party rejected the popular front, opposing its class collaborationist orientation.

In a critique of the experience in the US in the 1930s, Post’s conclusions are, as we will see, eerily similar to the lessons I will draw about the experience of the French Popular Front of 1936 to 1938:

The allure of the popular front/realignment politics is quite powerful. It appears to be a *shortcut* to building a significant socialist left and winning concrete gains that will improve the lives of working and oppressed peoples. The hope is that forging alliances with “progressive” leaders of the labor and social movements and using the Democratic Party as a “bullhorn” we can change the relationship of forces, win reforms, and build radicalism. Unfortunately, this strategy has only produced failures and setbacks – ultimately because it is based on an unrealistic understanding of capitalism and working-class consciousness. The simple fact is that real gains for working people, people of color, women, LGBT, and immigrants are only won through *mass social disruption*—through strikes, demonstrations, occupations, and the like. These disruptive actions also build working-class consciousness, as working people have to forge bonds of solidarity in common organizations and struggles, confront their employers and the state, and experience their own power to change the world. A strategy that allies the socialist left to the labor officials and Democratic liberals undermines our ability to consistently advocate and build independent organization and militancy.[[12]](#endnote-13)

In this article I will look at the experience of the Popular Front in France from January 1936 to June 1938 – an alliance between the Communist Party (PCF), the Socialist Party (SFIO) and the bourgeois centre party, the Radicals – to argue that the politics of the popular front were a disaster for the working class. Further, I will argue that reformists rely on a completely disingenuous reading of the events of 1936 similar to the misrepresentations of the New Deal popular front critiqued by Charlie Post. Sunkaraargued in February 2019:

[S]omething unexpected happened when the Blum government entered office – the ambitions of working people were unleashed. Not content with a resounding electoral victory for Popular Front parties, workers went on strike, occupying factories and paralyzing production.[[13]](#endnote-14)

Sunkara concedes that this is not likely today in the US; in fact he admits “we’re in an almost unprecedented state of weakness”. But he blithely assures his readers that a Sanders presidency, with no mass base and no workers’ organisations of any strength or militancy, can forge a path to reform “through confrontation with elites”. How this is a strategy to win, when a militant, well organised working class could not, he admits, “is vague”. Why the popular front is of interest is not even explained. The only purpose it serves is to legitimise class collaboration, and reduce what is a question of class struggle and organisation to the election of a president at the head of the Democratic Party representing, not organised workers and the oppressed, but the major imperialist bourgeoisie in the world.

As I will show, this massively understates what it took in 1936 in France to force the ruling class to offer reforms and presents no realistic assessment of why an impressive movement, far beyond anything even Sunkara thinks is possible today, could end in catastrophic defeat. Like others who sing the praises of the Popular Front government of Léon Blum, Sunkara ignores the consequences, including the minor detail that the Popular Front paved the way to fascism. And all he can offer as an explanation of the ultimate failure of Blum’s government, is: “[i]t’s difficult to keep workers mobilized once gains are made, and capital has the structural power to undermine those gains”.[[14]](#endnote-15)

If a genuinely socialist movement is to be rebuilt, the revolutionary left needs a keen sense of historical meaning, the relevance or not of any particular struggle for our time and an honest assessment of strategies tried in the past. Otherwise workers will be condemned to avoidable defeats and miss opportunities to win victories. With such a wealth of experience behind our movement, we need not rely only on our own experiences. If the sacrifices and achievements of past generations are not to be wasted, reformist misrepresentations of the lessons from their fight for a better world need to be vigorously combated. That is why understanding the popular front strategy matters.

## Background to the Popular Front

On 6 February, 1934, fascist and monarchist armed gangs attacked the French parliament. The fighting with police left 15 dead and 1,435 wounded. The coup brought down the government headed by Édouard Daladier of the bourgeois Radical Party. To gleeful acclaim from the fascists, the new government was headed by the right winger Gaston Doumergue.

But at the grass roots it led to a new era of unity between the Stalinist PCF and the SFIO. It was also the catalyst for a rising tide of working class militancy, strikes, and occupations lasting until the end of 1938. Within a week, on 12 February, in response to a call by the Socialist Party and endorsement at the last moment by the reformist union, the CGT, the PCF and its smaller union federation, the CGT-U, four and a half million struck across the country. Two demonstrations in Paris, one led by the Socialists, the other by the Communists, made history by joining forces for the first time since the Communists split from the SFIO in 1920. It is said that a million marched, chanting “Unity! Unity!”.

The threat of fascism and the need to respond to growing economic attacks from employers underpinned workers’ desire for unity. The PCF since 1928 had denounced the Socialists as social fascists, refusing joint activities. Now this so-called “third period” sectarian idiocy was under enormous pressure from worker militants. At the same time, with Hitler rearming on a massive scale, Stalin began looking for allies among the Western powers, and sought to rebuild the CP’s support, which had declined since 1928. This intersected with the growth of a radicalising left inside the Socialist Party.

There were PCF militants who had never fully endorsed the third period policy. So for instance, Jacques Doriot, based in Saint Denis, to the north of Paris, had been arguing since the increasing violence of the far right in 1933 for overtures to the Socialists. He refused to disband an anti-fascist committee of Communists, Socialists and other militants set up in response to the February riot, publicly challenging Stalin’s policy. His expulsion in June could not stop the growing tide of support for unity.[[15]](#endnote-16) In fact the very conference at which he was expelled voted for a united front with the SFIO. In spite of continuing resistance from the PCF leader Maurice Thorez, in July 1934 the PCF and SFIO signed a pact for a united front and held a massive joint rally on 14 July.

However, the PCF was under pressure from Moscow, which was anxious to form something of an alliance with Britain and France against Hitler. This was difficult if their parties in Western Europe were agitating for *class* rather than just popular struggle. And so the PCF argued to extend the new united front to include the Radicals, the party of the Republican bourgeoisie with an urban petty bourgeois and peasant voting base. Thus the term Popular Front, or *People*’s Front as it was called until later, was devised to highlight its cross-class nature. The Popular Front was formalised in January 1936 in preparation for a joint election campaign, which they would go on to win, making Léon Blum the first socialist President of France. The Socialist and Radical parties then formed government with the backing of the PCF.

A massive strike wave exploded following the election of Blum as prime minister. This is a fact. *Jacobin* writers create the illusion that if Sanders were elected president, there could be a similar response. Building on the fudging by Sunkara I referred to above, where he implied the comparison with 1936, Eric Blanc more openly suggests the election of Sanders could spark a mass strike wave. “Just by running for president in 2016, Bernie helped catalyze the deepest labor fight-back in decades. Imagine what could become possible by electing him ‘organizer-in-chief’ in 2020. Combine heightened working-class expectations with a democratic-socialist White House, and you have the recipe for a potentially unprecedented strike upsurge.”[[16]](#endnote-17) But any comparison with France in 1936 is pure fantasy. There is nothing to compare between the US today and then.

The atmosphere when Blum became PM on 4 June 1936 was electric. But it was not generated just by the electoral victory. Actually the Popular Front had ridden on the back of the rising wave of working class radicalism. And there were not just a handful of individuals calling themselves socialists elected as candidates for a bourgeois party like the Democrats. Blum headed a genuinely mass Socialist Party with 202,000 members and a youth wing of over 50,000. Today, in the US with a population eight times the size, this would mean 1.6 million, with a 400,000-strong youth organisation. The PCF, looked to as the far left, had been growing rapidly – from 29,000 in 1933 to 90,000 by 1936 – and it would continue to grow to 298,000 by December 1936. The youth wing grew even more rapidly: from 25,000 in January 1936 to 100,000 by November. Today the equivalent in the US would be an organisation of 720,00-1.6 million, organised among the most radical working class militants and well organised in workplaces across the country, plus a youth movement of 5-600,000.

In the election, the main swing, of 21 percent, was to the SFIO, increasing its seats from 97 to 146; and the PCF, with a 15 percent swing, increasing its MPs by 10 seats to 72. So these two mass workers’ parties held 218 of the 598 seats in parliament. The front with the Radicals actually helped shore up their vote because Popular Front parties agreed to support each other in the second round of voting. This took place in seats where no one won an outright majority in the first round, which is most seats. This meant in a range of seats the SFIO and PCF candidates stood down in the second round and the parties backed the Radicals. So while the Radical vote fell, the Popular Front helped prevent an even more precipitate decline, which should have been welcomed, not minimised, by the workers’ parties.

## The strike wave

Yes, there was a strike wave; a quarter of the workforce were out on strike within weeks. That would mean about 40 million in the US today. The Communists had become the dominant force within the working class. Its power was not simply based on its numbers, but also its control over a reunited trade union movement combined with its radical image.

In the Renault factories alone, 35,000 workers went on strike on 28 May 1936, occupying the factories in Boulogne-Billancourt and in Flins. They were followed by all of the Paris metallurgy factories. Up to six million struck and occupations spread like wildfire, drawing in non-unionised workers, many of whom had never taken industrial action before, including department store employees, bank and insurance clerks. For instance, a socialist recorded how the workers in a small artisanal workshop where he lived approached him for help: “[n]aturally we are going to stop work like everyone else. Would you be able to help us draw up a list of demands?” In a department store in Paris, in June when other such stores had been on strike for days, workers felt too intimidated by management to speak to each other. Nevertheless, “something indefinable was in the air” and by the afternoon, notes saying things like “You can count on me” and “Do you want help?” had landed on the desk of the one employee known to be a CGT member.[[17]](#endnote-18)

Bank workers and concierges joined the strike movement. There were general strikes in confectionery, woodwork and furniture, military clothing, apprentice hat-making, footwear, leather goods, car washing, water authorities, cinemas and publishing. In Paris, insurance company employees went on strike on 8 June, with pickets and occupations. A day later 50 companies were occupied. Danos and Gibelin, activists in the movement at the time, give an ironic sense of the atmosphere:

The managers of these firms, used to the habitual docility of their employees, had never dreamed of a day when they would see their well-behaved staff camping on the pavement in front of their office doors, and at the very first meeting...they agreed to sign a deal.

The press reported a settlement agreed to by the union, only to print the next day that actually, it had only been a draft, and was still being considered. But other than one office, the strike continued, with workers pressing for more than the employers were inclined to give.[[18]](#endnote-19)

The employers signed the Matignon Accords, which granted sweeping reforms, within days. They granted huge pay rises, the 40-hour week, paid holidays, union rights and unemployment insurance – all long term union demands, signifying a stunning advance in workers’ conditions. But it didn’t work, the militancy continued. In the regions, in industry after industry, union officials struggled to get workers back to work. They either wanted more than was guaranteed in the Accords or they didn’t trust employers to implement them unless the agreement was more clearly binding. In one instance, the union, after coming back with an improved offer, could not convince 700 delegates to end their strikes. And employers couldn’t now dismiss them as misled by troublemakers. The Popular Front leaders were anything but. In fact when one of them tried to address “his” workers in the absence of the strike committee, according to Danos and Gibelin he was driven out “before a forest of clenched fists, while all the workers chanted ‘Out! Out! Out!’, and his exit was crowned by a burst from the *Internationale*”.[[19]](#endnote-20)

But Sunkara intones: “Blum had neither the support or resolve for more radical measures”.[[20]](#endnote-21) Hah! Yes, the bourgeois Radicals predictably did not support him. But millions of workers were clamouring for more.

Marceau Pivert, the leader of the left wing of the SFIO, became famous for his declaration that “everything is possible”. Over three-quarters of the strikes in June were occupations. A beautiful painting titled “The Strikes of June 1936”, by a young left wing artist, Boris Taslitzky, depicts the streets of the Parisian suburbs as a carnival of the oppressed. Julian Jackson, in his excellent book *The Popular Front in France*, records the words of Alexander Werth at the time:

[B]uilding after building – small factories and large factories, even comparatively small workshops – were flying red, or red and tricolour flags – with pickets in front of the closed gates.

Later, in his trial by the pro-fascist Vichy regime, Blum would describe the situation as: “a social explosion” which “struck the government in the face” as soon as it was installed in power. Jackson paints a picture of a high level of class consciousness and confidence: “[t]he occupations were generally organized and disciplined...machinery and stocks were looked after with jealous care by the striking workers”. And Blum would particularly remark that it was this “tranquillity, this sort of majesty” which inspired terror in the capitalists’ breasts.[[21]](#endnote-22)

Strikes were provoked by victimisations of militants, made easy by rising unemployment. Anyone could easily be replaced. Attacks on union rights went hand in hand with layoffs and attacks on conditions. So once the strikes took off, any attack by an employer was met with strike action if not an occupation. Workers with no experience sent delegations to union offices to ask how you went on strike. We don’t know what to demand, they’d say, you will have to help us. Or workers in one factory would help less experienced draw up a log of claims so they could walk out, or even to justify an already accomplished walkout.

Just as in many other revolutionary situations recorded in history, workers got a taste of their power and, after over a decade of threatening far right militias and increasingly vicious employers, everyone just wanted to join in.

So let’s turn to some explanation of the factors which resulted in this massive outpouring of working class self-activity.

Jackson looks at several reasons why the strikes took off in 1936. They did not just erupt because Blum was elected president.[[22]](#endnote-23) The first impetus towards mass struggle was the fascist riot of February 1934, when managers had tried to prevent workers attending the counter-protest, something which was not forgotten in the succeeding years. Secondly, the unity between the Socialist and Communist parties contributed to the growth of the SFIO-controlled CGT from 785,000 in 1935 before unification with the much smaller PCF-controlled CGT-U to 4 million in the united union federation (CGTU) in 1937.

The PCF militants were leaders of hundreds of thousands of organised trade unionists. In the process of unification, the PCF had boosted its factory cells’ activity in order to maintain and advance their influence, and turned towards an emphasis on organising around workers’ concrete demands, beginning with a round of rolling stoppages. The strike wave had begun before the election, the second round of which was held on 3 May. A dock strike in Marseilles in December 1935 played a significant role in creating the momentum of 1936. It was called by the newly united union federation, over wage cuts which the former SFIO-controlled CGT had agreed to, and was closely followed by a one-day strike which again was over a proposed 10 percent wage cut. The 1 May strike by coal miners in 1936 was prepared over weeks before. Union membership in the mines had escalated from 26 percent in 1935 to 43 percent by March 1936.

The CGTU used the impetus of the expectations raised by the coming elections to get 85 percent of workers out on strike for 1 May. But the Renault strike which began on 28 May was not some spontaneous outpouring of enthusiasm for Blum or the election win. Surrounded by strikes over conditions in smaller plants, they received an appeal from the strike committee at neighbouring plants. The PCF-controlled artillery workshop went out in solidarity. Then after the arrival of several leading Communist union officials, strikes spread through the plant.

The election win gave some impetus to an already rising level of struggle, but it was union militants, many of them PCF members, who were responsible for the massive strike wave, not simply the election of Blum.

Once the movement took off, many strikes and occupations were quite spontaneous and involved even non-unionised workers. Yet still the role of the PCF and CGTU officials and militants was crucial. The first factory occupation, on 29 May at Coder engineering, was “carefully prepared by the factory’s Communist union activists in close collaboration with the party and the local Popular Front committee”. The PCF had done long-term propaganda work there. Jackson argues that each subsequent outbreak was partly the result of local issues and emphasises the central role played by Communists both in preparing the ground by long-standing propaganda and in the timing and organisation of the strikes which broke out at the end of May. In fact, one official told the PCF Central Committee that the organisation of the strikes had occurred “on the basis of methods developed for fifteen years by the CGTU”. “But often, where no union members existed, the strikes threw up their own leaders. The relationship between these new strike leaders, the mass of strikers and the official union leaders was far from easy: the workers wanted ‘their’ strike”, but of course the union officials wanted to take control. Even where the PCF had a base, such as at Renault, a revolt by the rank and file delayed the end of the 28 May strike because some workers wanted more than the agreement the union signed.[[23]](#endnote-24)

Clearly, the election of the Popular Front government made workers more ready to take action, assuming it would be more sympathetic to them than previous right wing-dominated governments. But this new sentiment was not generated by Blum particularly. Some local councils where the Popular Front had won elections in 1935 organised food supplies for factory occupations. The Communist Doriot’s St Denis council produced 130,000 free meals in 15 days. And the election of one of their own, a former Renault worker, to the Boulogne-Billancourt seat in the first round of the national elections was a real boost to confidence.

But Jackson emphasises “the end of the fratricidal struggle between CGT and CGTU” as of fundamental importance. Apart from the growth in union membership, unification also reinvigorated the CGT and improved the authority of the Communist officials. And, after the defensive situation workers had been in during the Depression of the early 1930s, an improvement in the economy in 1935 gave a boost to confidence that gains could be won.[[24]](#endnote-25)

## Reformist misrepresentation

Today in the US, the far right is not staging attempted coups and marches of tens of thousands under arms; Sanders is not a leader of a mass workers’ party of any kind; he’s tied to one of the bourgeois parties which rules over the major imperialist state of the world. While it was reprehensible that the PCF pushed for the alliance with the bourgeois Radical Party, the SFIO was at least a mass working class party. There are no organisations in the US anything like the PCF or the SFIO, let alone one with over a million members, which even pretend they are anti-capitalist.

But the argument against the way the events of 1936 are depicted by modern day reformists doesn’t stop there.

Reformists exaggerate the importance of Blum and other such politicians brought to power on the back of workers’ struggles as a figurehead. To do that, they write out of history the importance of thousands of worker militants. They ignore or downplay the organising efforts of worker activists who laid the basis for the inspiring occupations, the discipline and solid stance which electrified other workers and intimidated their class oppressors. The idea that the upsurge of strikes and occupations in mid-1936 was largely “spontaneous”, or that it was simply inspired by the election of Blum, who wasn’t even on the left of the SFIO, seriously misrepresents the reality. It trivialises the effort which went into building strong working class organisations which made such radicalism possible. And it dishonestly creates illusions in parliamentary elections and the role of even not very radical politicians as the road to working class mass struggle.

Militants used an important victory at the electoral level to escalate what was already a mass movement of resistance. Nothing like them exists today in the US. So to maintain the fairy tale that a similar outburst could follow the election of Sanders, the mass of workers and their grassroots leaders have to be airbrushed out of the picture. In this reformist narrative, millions of workers are reduced to mere props for politicians and their electoral campaigns. However, Julian Jackson, an honest academic historian, sympathetically catalogues the workers’ actions and draws interesting conclusions: “if they lacked political sophistication, they possessed intuition of the highest order: the chance might not come again”.[[25]](#endnote-26)

Think about that, “*intuition of the highest order*”, a characteristic of workers’ struggles which underpins the Marxist confidence in workers’ ability to emancipate themselves and thereby humanity. Reformism depends on wiping from our collective memory the many talents and organisational genius which workers demonstrate when challenging the power of our oppressors. The effects of the struggle on workers’ consciousness and confidence is of little consequence if the goal is to portray electoral victory as the all-important question.

At the time observers wrote descriptions of the impact of the strikes on workers’ experience. Simone Weil, the intellectual of anarchist sympathies who had previously worked in a factory, describes what many observers did in the months of May and June: “joy”, “smiling workers”, music, dancing and laughter in the factories and streets. Photos from the time show striking café workers out in the streets with demonstrators, workers dancing, playing cards or just socialising in their occupied factories and in the streets. It truly *was* a festival of the oppressed, as the young artist portrayed it.

But some commentators use these descriptions to argue that workers weren’t really revolutionary, it was all just a bit of fun before they knew they’d have to go back to normal. Jackson argues that this is only one side of the events: there were always clenched fists and red flags. “As well as joy there was fear; as well as celebration there was struggle; as well as friends, enemies...grim faces as well as smiling ones.”[[26]](#endnote-27)

A photo of a mass meeting in the Renault Billancourt factory on 28 May 1936 is typical. The thousands of workers stand, smiling but determined, with clenched fists in the air voting for strike action. Even a photo of a group of middle class women, Popular Front supporters, shows them with raised fists. Once our focus is on these glimpses of both sides of working class self-activity, the fundamental difference between reform and revolution leaps out of these images. As Marx said in the *German Ideology*, a revolution is necessary, not just because there is no other way to overthrow the ruling class, but because it is only in the mass struggle that workers can change and become fit to rule over a new social order.

## Wasn’t the Popular Front worth the gamble?

But when workers are drawn into class collaboration the joy, the promise of liberation, the potential for their confidence to grow and develop is overridden by debilitating compromises. But before we discuss this constraint, it’s worth noting that there were observers who recorded their misgivings at the time.

In France, Trotsky predicted confidently that it would end in disaster. Again and again, he warned that the aim of the popular front, initiated by the Communists, was to curtail the workers’ militancy, to prevent the development of a revolutionary movement:

[W]hen the masses are impatient and explosive, a more imposing brake is needed, with the participation of the “Communists”. Joint meetings, parade processions, oaths, mixing the banner of the Commune and of Versailles, noise, bedlam, demagogy – all these serve a single aim: to curb and demoralise the mass movement.

He pointed out that Sarraut, leader of the Radical Party, openly

declared that his innocent concessions to the People’s Front were nothing but the *safety valve* of the regime. Such frankness may have seemed imprudent. But it was rewarded by violent applause from the benches of the extreme left.

Trotsky firmly believed revolution was possible. And it was necessary, if the fascists were to be defeated. Yet with their meagre forces, the Trotskyists could not impact events.[[27]](#endnote-28)

In Britain, Edgar Hardcastle, a member of the Socialist Party of Great Britain, wrote of the compromises already made by the Communist Party to enable this alliance:

They had to deny to the workers that “Socialism is the only hope” and independence the only method. On the contrary, they had to say that capitalism is not so bad after all, provided that its representatives are Liberals, not Conservatives... They had to help save the Radical party from being reduced heavily in size. Here are some statements from Communist sources about how they helped the Labourites [by which he means the Socialists] and Radicals...

[T]he *Daily Worker* quoted from the Russian Communist paper, *Izvestia*, the statement that the Radicals “have preserved their influence among the main mass of their voters. This was the direct result of the fact that they had joined the Anti-Fascist People’s Front...”

This, it will be seen, proves that the Communists made and kept a bargain which was fair to the Radicals, but saving a capitalist Liberal Party from extinction is queer work for an alleged working-class party to be doing.

Some might dismiss his comments as typical rancour from a sectarian. But they were based on what was already being established in the public record:

At first the election results frightened the capitalist investors, but Mr. Blum soon made a “reassuring statement,” and this “relieved the tension” on the stock exchange (*Daily Telegraph*, May 12th). Mr. Blum’s assurance was that he would govern “within the present social regime” (*Times*, May 12th).

And Hardcastle’s prediction of a likely outcome was tragically prophetic. He argued that the SFIO and PCF had entered a trap, and said of those who thought that “entering into pacts with capitalist parties” could solve the urgent questions they confronted:

They forget that in taking on the administration of capitalism they do not gain strength, but lose it. They at once begin to earn the unpopularity and contempt which always centres on the Government which carries on capitalism. The effort to solve problems inside capitalism creates uncertainty, mistrust, apathy and despair among the workers who have cherished false hopes, and it correspondingly helps the Conservatives and Fascists later on.[[28]](#endnote-29)

These contemporary observations, which proved to be tragically prophetic, must be the basis for thinking through strategies for today. Anyone who has lived through neoliberalism with Labour and Socialist parties imposing capitalist attacks can easily recognise the process. But the foresight of a socialist at the time, the devastating experience of experiments in cooperation between workers’ parties and the capitalist class, find no empathy among those who reject the need to overthrow the system.

## From revolutionary possibilities to disaster

A consistent, resolute, progressive tactic on the part of the social democrats produces in the masses a feeling of security, self-confidence and desire for struggle; a vacillating weak tactic, based on an underestimation of the proletariat, has a crippling and confusing effect upon the masses.

Rosa Luxemburg, 1906.[[29]](#endnote-30)

The narrative of the Popular Front does not end in June 1936. In the next two years Luxemburg’s insight and Trotsky’s warnings were borne out, with tragic results. Bhaskar Sunkara has argued on multiple occasions that the reforms contained the seeds of their undoing:

The upsurges of May and June 1936 triggered a business counteroffensive over the implementation of the reforms. With political instability growing, Blum’s middle-class coalition partners abandoned the fight. The leader had neither the support nor the resolve to pursue more radical measures. Blum was pushed out of power in little more than a year.[[30]](#endnote-31)

Superficially this is a factual description of events. But it leaves out that workers had enormous expectations, and there was huge support to take on the right. And, by ignoring politics – the role of the parties in the Popular Front, what alternatives might have been considered – it offers no hint that there could be a different route available to workers in a similar situation. In his account, history marches on in an inevitable arc back to capitalist normality. Which in the conditions of France in the 1930s meant the triumph of fascism.

So let’s deconstruct Sunkara’s narrative. Much of the bourgeoisie, in response to France’s economic woes and working class demands, were turning to support for the fascists. The Radical Party – the traditional party of the peasantry and the urban petty bourgeoisie – was also moving to the right; meanwhile the desperate, disillusioned middle classes were turning away from the moderate Radical Party. They were attracted to the fascists because they seemed to offer extreme solutions to an extreme crisis.

It was only by the working class becoming a revolutionary – i.e. extreme – alternative pole of attraction, that there could be any hope of winning them away from the far right. This made the idea of a bloc with the Radicals a disaster for the workers’ movement. It was absolutely predictable that such a party would abandon the fight if it meant confronting the capitalists and their state. As Trotsky argued, in opposition to the PCF, the proletariat had to fight for their own interests.

In one of his first proclamations after being installed as prime minister, Blum, at the employers’ behest to “shoulder his responsibilities, called on his supporters to ‘submit to the law of the land’.”[[31]](#endnote-32) And this was before anything had been won! Hardly a basis on which to lead workers to achieve the most that was possible. In fact, the employers falsely create the image of Blum as the instigator of the negotiations which ended with the Matignon Accords in order to increase his prestige, all the better to use him to discipline an unruly working class. Only years later would Blum reveal his subordinate role: “[n]o doubt I would myself have attempted what is now called the Matignon agreement. But I am compelled by respect for the truth to say that the first initiative came from the employers’ leaders.”[[32]](#endnote-33)

The Communist militants in particular had laid the basis over years of experience for the massive upsurge of June 1936. But once it became clear that workers were not satisfied with vague promises, that they didn’t assume the Blum government would defend their conditions and were determined to keep fighting, the PCF sharply changed tack. They now discouraged any development of independent activity by workers. After all, they were under pressure not to alienate the Radicals for fear that they would walk out of their alliance. Strikes had multiplied during May, while waiting for the new government to take office. Employers complained in a communiqué from an assembly they convened, that “our impression is that the employees do not seem to see the solution to the conflicts in the same light as when negotiations were begun”. On appeal from the government-in-waiting, the CGT issued statements calling on workers to preserve the movement’s “calm, discipline, order, prudence and dignity” because they should remain “peaceful, controlled and correct”. They should avoid “exaggeration, bouts of demagogy, and dangerous disorder”. Soon after Blum’s call for law and order, the PCF issued a statement reassuring the press that they were “determined to retain the same discipline, and peaceful character which the movement had had since the beginning”. By 11 June, the PCF was moving to end the occupations and strikes. Their attitude was summed up by Thorez, the Stalinist supremo, with his infamous phrase: “one needs to know when to end a strike”. In reply to Pivert’s exuberance, *L’Humanité*, the Communist paper, ran the headline “everything is not possible”.

The assertion that Blum did not have support for more radical measures sits uncomfortably if anyone looks beyond the leaders of the unions and the popular front parties. The fact is, workers had occupied thousands of workplaces across the country, millions had joined a union, struck, and marched. But what is that to the reformist Sunkara? He assumes they didn’t support anything more than one round of reforms. Yet strikes continued after June, at such a rate that one historian[[33]](#endnote-34) has argued they represented a “revolt against work”. Jackson summarises the situation at Renault: “workers’ resistance took the form of absenteeism, lateness, production slowdowns and violence against non-union workers”. A lot of the militancy was aimed at foremen, to the extent that at Renault in March 1937 the foremen went on strike against “union tyranny”! Strikes continued to be endemic, but were and are dismissed by historians. This ongoing economic struggle was the basis on which the movement could have been taken to higher levels of organisation and determination. Instead, strikes remained “wildcat” because the unions and the PCF spent all their time trying to prevent them, condemning them, and appealing to workers to honour appalling agreements they signed with management. The CGT’s paper *L’Unité* repeatedly attacked such strikes, noting on one occasion:

[a]n unusual number of absences on trivial or non-existent grounds...everyone should respect the work schedule set up by the management and accepted by us. We implore you to obey our union’s discipline, for in no way should we lay ourselves open to the enemy.[[34]](#endnote-35)

According to this approach, the best way to defend themselves and the government against growing agitation from the far right was to capitulate to the bosses’ offensive against the gains achieved in the June strike wave! From start to finish, the aim of keeping the Radical Party in the Popular Front government led to the PCF holding back the workers’ movement from pushing further, or challenging for power.

Even Simone Weil, an anarchist, decried the militancy rather than arguing to build on it. After a visit to the Nord, in autumn 1936, she wrote:

[B]efore June there was in the factories a certain order, a certain discipline founded on slavery. The slavery has largely disappeared; the order linked to the slavery has disappeared at the same time. One can only welcome this. But industry cannot survive without order.[[35]](#endnote-36)

She went on to complain about the “arbitrary” control of production and the elemental nature of strikes organised by newly appointed delegates who had the temerity to act without consulting their officials. Jackson dismisses these cynical attacks: “It is too simple to stigmatize the delegates and workers for irresponsibility or abuse of power. There were serious issues at stake”. In the coal mines of the Nord and Pas de Calais, the union argued for workers to work ever harder because “the precondition of the success of the Popular Front” depended on the maintenance of high productivity. At some places the CGT created vigilance committees to police their members. Unsurprisingly, “this productivist rhetoric fell on deaf ears”![[36]](#endnote-37) The PCF condemned strikers who booed leaders like Johaux, the General Secretary of the CGT, and who wouldn’t end a metal workers’ strike in March 1938, as “Trotskyist provocateurs”, arguing that if they made the strike official, Blum’s government would fall. In the face of all this, it’s not surprising that there developed “a difference of perceptions between the unions and the workers about the purposes of the strike movement of 1936”.[[37]](#endnote-38)

The attitude of the PCF was never a secret; it had to be openly stated in order for them to play the role that Stalin expected of them. In February 1938 Ambroise Croizat explained in the parliament why the Communists voted for new legislation designed to tie unions up in an arbitration bureaucracy:

The working class wants order. For the workers, a strike is a weapon of last resort imposed by the employers’ intransigence. The working class will be only too glad if we give them something to use instead of a strike.[[38]](#endnote-39)

It would be one thing if Blum and the SFIO had stood to the left of the PCF and campaigned to take things beyond what suited Stalin’s class collaborationist policies. But the SFIO didn’t pretend to be revolutionary as the PCF did. They acted as reformists before and since, taking pride in being “loyal managers of capitalism”, as Blum described himself. Blum was very much on the right of the SFIO; however, Marceau Pivert on the left did nothing to forestall the coming sell-outs. The eulogies in *Jacobin* to Blum do not inspire any confidence that those who subscribe to their politics will play a positive role in any future mass struggle by workers against the capitalist class.

At the end of 1936, the PCF called for a broadening of the Popular Front into a *French* Front by incorporating right wing conservatives who were anti-German on nationalist grounds. This, at the same time that the Blum government launched a major spending program on armaments which undercut workers’ living standards. The PCF, thought of as the far left, refused to arm workers, refused to seriously organise and prepare for an offensive against the employers and the gun-toting far right. Stalin’s alliance with their class enemy was totally counterposed to the class struggle their militants courageously led.

As Hardcastle, the British socialist quoted earlier argued, it is the logic of capitalism that no matter what reforms can be won, they will always be precarious. This was especially the case in the Depression of the 1930s. And 1937 saw a marked decline in workers’ activity as the unions became tied up in the new arbitration system introduced as part of the Matignon Accords. This downturn in struggle encouraged bosses to take the offensive against the 40-hour week. Prices shot up, wiping out all the wage gains by May 1938.

The Popular Front government moved steadily to the right. In March 1937 Blum’s police fired on workers protesting against a fascist meeting, killing six. On 22 June 1937, just one year after becoming prime minister, Blum resigned, when the right wing-controlled Senate refused to pass bills to deal with the growing economic crisis. Is it any wonder that the news of Blum’s resignation was met with indifference by an increasingly disoriented working class on the defensive in the face of a ruling class counter-attack? They lacked any leadership which could inspire them to rise up and defeat the right once and for all. In fact their leaders were intent on the exact opposite: to accept whatever the bosses demanded and to defend a government which increasingly offered no defence against the onslaught. And so began a spiral of increasing attacks by the government and employers.

Blum was replaced by Camille Chautemps of the Radical Party, who would later propose they hand over power for Pétain to form a fascistic regime. The Popular Front would remain in government under the Radicals (with Blum returning for a month in 1938) until it was finally dissolved in June 1938.

In 1934 Trotsky had predicted that “if the united front [between the PCF and Socialists] enters upon an unworthy romance with the Radicals, ...apathy, the precursor of catastrophe, will make headway”.[[39]](#endnote-40) And events from late 1937 into 1938 were a ghastly vindication of his words. In spite of some heroic struggles, workers could not get on the front foot again, suffering more defeats than victories while their leaders preached order.

In December 1937 workers occupied the Goodrich tyre factory near Paris, the only photo of which survives because the Nazis used it on their propaganda poster, campaigning against the “threat” posed by a combative working class and left. On 23 December, the Minister of the Interior, wanting to make an example of this strike, sent 600 mobile guards to surround the factory. In response to blaring sirens, neighbouring workers mobilised, and by the end of the day Goodrich was encircled by 30,000 supporters, forcing the minister to call his attack dogs away. At Christmas public servants made history by striking against the Popular Front government. So on 29 December, Paris had no transport, gas or electricity. In March and April 1938, 150,000 workers in the metallurgical plants of Paris struck, the largest strike since June 1936.

The PCF and SFIO, rather than leap to the defence of their working class supporters and use their determination to push back against the growing attacks by the far right, warned workers that if they persisted the government would fall. When it did, the PCF let the strike escalate, trying not to be outflanked. But once they had got control of the strike, the Communist officials brought it to a quick end in spite of widespread protests by militants. In disgust, 80,000 left the metal workers’ union in the next few months.

But even then the struggle was not over. In November 1938, wildcat strikes to defend the 40-hour week broke out across the country. In an attempt to rescue something of their reputation, the CGT called a general strike for 30 November, the event Jackson labels the “death knell”. The miners responded and some factories were occupied, but without transport and other vital industries going out, the strike was a terrible defeat. At the Renault factory a bloody confrontation with police left 46 cops and 24 workers badly injured. And the workers were forced to walk through police lines as they ended their occupation, making the fascist salute and chanting “long live the police”!

This devastating defeat was the direct result of the craven attitude of the PCF and CGT. The unions declared that the general strike would be strictly limited to one day, and there were to be no occupations, demonstrations or meetings. That didn’t stop the ruling class from mobilising. Over five days the government made requisitions, mobilised their forces, threatened civil servants and railwaymen, and stiffened the employers’ resistance while using the public radio for propaganda. Danos and Gibelin comment: “[a] workers movement weakened by two years of capitulation could not resist such a mobilisation...by ten o’clock on the morning of the 30th the government was able to announce that ‘the railways are working normally’”. And other sectors soon followed.[[40]](#endnote-41) They endorse a statement in *Syndicates* which drew what they describe as “the essential lesson”. The strike was an attack on the government, “therefore necessarily took on the character of an insurrection... But an insurrection cannot declare in advance that it will act in accordance with the law. That, however, is just what the CGT did”.[[41]](#endnote-42)

In the wake of this humiliating defeat, hundreds of thousands were sacked and militants were victimised in the midst of widespread lockouts and repression. CGT membership plunged and by late 1939 all the gains except the paid holidays had been swept away.

## Assessment

How do we know that the working class would have fought and won more? We don’t, because it was never posed as an alternative by either of the organisations with sufficient strength to carry the struggle forward. So let’s consider this issue by looking at another famous episode in history. If Lenin and the Bolsheviks had kow-towed to the Provisional Government in Russia after February in 1917, it would be accepted wisdom now that there was no support to go further, that the soviets could not have taken power.

Leading organisations, and their leadership, have to *fight*, fight to explain why workers need to do x and not y. The determined leadership of Lenin and the broader Bolshevik party, their painstaking and persistent work on the ground, nurtured and built on every flicker of militancy. Their arguments for the soviets to take power increasingly made sense in light of the actions of the Provisional Government. This combination of objective circumstances and decisive leadership is what made the October revolution possible.

In France in 1936, it was vital that a party with some weight argued that the working class should fight tooth and nail to win the leadership of the middle classes; a party which recognised that this could only be done by posing the solution of revolution, of taking power from those who were funding and encouraging the fascists. The petty bourgeois masses, moving towards the fascists, could only be won by actions to combat the effects of the crisis and by pointing out who was responsible for the misery inflicted on everyone. In other words, to win the middle classes away from the fascists, workers had to offer a *revolutionary* alternative. Moderation did nothing to win the middle classes, instead it repelled them by seeming helpless in the face of social breakdown. In July 1936 Trotsky wrote: “If the ‘middle Classes’ in whose name the People’s Front was expressly created are unable to find revolutionary audacity on the left, they will seek it on the right”.[[42]](#endnote-43) Tragically he was proven right.

The argument that there wasn’t support for anything more radical is pure ideology and acts as a cover for reformist and Stalinist leaders who failed the test of events. We can’t definitively prove they could have challenged for power, simply because that alternative was never posed, except by tiny handfuls of Trotskyists. As Danos and Gibelin conclude, we cannot guarantee that a serious struggle could have ended with socialism. “But there is one thing we can say – that such a struggle was not engaged because the leaders of the mass organisations took a deliberate decision that it should not be.”[[43]](#endnote-44) Sunkara and other reformists cannot face this issue because their agenda is to promote the same class collaboration of the popular front. If a bourgeois party with its roots in the middle classes could pull socialists with a mass base among militant workers to preside over a crushing defeat of that base, how much more inevitable is it if socialists with no base in society, let alone one including militant workers, are elected in a party of the big bourgeoisie. Especially when in government they will be presiding over the major imperialist power in the world.

Interestingly, Jackson, in his detailed study, comments that by mid-1938, the small group of Trotsky’s supporters were beginning to grow as workers drew lessons from the sell-outs and passivity of the reformist parties. But they were too small to turn the tide. Jackson sums up:

It is far from the case that the Matignon Agreement was the only possible outcome to the labour conflict of June 1936. The strikers may not have always had a very clear notion of their objectives, but their movement was much more potentially menacing to the social order than many people have, for different reasons, been willing to admit.[[44]](#endnote-45)

## Conclusions

The Popular Front in France has terrible, but vital lessons for anyone who wants to see society fundamentally changed. Every revolutionary situation illustrates the incredible potential for self-emancipation of the mass of workers and oppressed. But such a situation becomes counter-revolutionary if the subjective factor does not develop in tandem with the objective. The policy of the popular front sapped the energy of the workers, and gave succour to the right. The PCF, under Stalin’s directions, and determined to prove themselves to the Radicals as capable of keeping control over the working class, treated their followers as an army to be marched on and off the stage of history as it suited them. As a result, a mood of fatigue and despair took hold among masses of workers who had stood on the brink of revolution. In June 1936 Trotsky saw both potential and danger in the situation, writing prophetically: “[t]he struggle must now be consummated in the greatest of victories or it will end in the most ghastly of defeats”.[[45]](#endnote-46)

Tragically, the narrative does not just end with a return to capitalist democracy and the loss of hard-won gains. Far from stopping fascism, the class collaboration of the Popular Front paved the way for it. The Radicals preferred fascism to workers’ power. The same Popular Front MPs who had been backed by the Communists and joined in government by the SFIO voted to ban the PCF in September 1939 and then in July 1940 supported the installation of the Pétain fascist-type regime which moved to Vichy to allow the Nazis to occupy most of France.

The black and white image of Pétain shaking hands with Hitler in October should be burned into our memories. It is the ultimate indictment of the popular front strategy.

In today’s glowing accounts of the Popular Front, leaders or political parties are not apportioned any responsibility for this catastrophic defeat of the movement at the head of which they stood. As Danos and Gibelin conclude, “[t]he leaders emerged victorious; but they must take responsibility for the events which were to follow, the working class alone bears the honour for the success achieved. The conditions and the lessons of that success deserve to be remembered today”.[[46]](#endnote-47)

Those who hold up the popular front as a way to change society for the better need to be defeated today if the mistakes of the past are not to be repeated. As Trotsky said, nothing is more dangerous than “the sugared poison of false hopes”.[[47]](#endnote-48)

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### Notes

1. Lenin 1917. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Hobsbawm 1997, p35. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Luxemburg 1906*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Hobsbawm 1997, p24. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Harman 1999. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Marx 1850. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Abidor 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Schwartz and Sunkara 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Post 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Paul Mason, “Labour’s best tactic to beat Boris Johnson? A popular front”, *The Guardian*, 3 August 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Stafford Cripps writing in ***Tribune***, 10 April 1938, quoted in Harman 1965. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Post 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Sunkara 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Trotsky 1979, p25. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Blanc 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Jackson 1988, p93. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. Danos and Gibelin 1986, pp88-98. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Sunkara 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Jackson 1988, pp85-86. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. The general argument and facts in the following paragraphs are from Jackson 1988, pp90-91 unless otherwise indicated. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Jackson 1988, pp92-94. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. ibid., p92. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. ibid., p93. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. ibid., p97. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Trotsky 1979, pp142-144. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. Hardcastle, 1936. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. Luxemburg 1906. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Sunkara 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. Danos and Gibelin 1986, pp60-62. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. ibid., p72. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. Michael Seidman, “The Birth of the Weekend and the Revolts against Work: the workers of the Paris region during the Popular Front”, *French Historical Studies*, 12 (2), Autumn 1981. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. Jackson 1988, p106. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. ibid., p107. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. ibid., p107. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. ibid., p108. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. Danos and Gibelin 1986, p212. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. Trotsky 1979, p59. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. Danos and Gibelin 1986, p229. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. ibid., p230. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. Trotsky 1979, p171. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. Danos and Gibelin 1986, p232. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. Jackson 1988, p104. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. Trotsky 1979, pp163-164. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
46. Danos and Gibelin 1986, p236. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
47. Trotsky 1979, p43. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)