What is Fascism?

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WHAT IS FASCISM?

'What is a fascist?' asked a 20 October article on the BBC's website, published amidst the furore surrounding the corporation's invitation to Nick Griffin of the BNP to take part its flagship political show Question Time.

It's answer was clear as mud – after taking soundings from various self-styled 'experts' it concluded that there is no meaningful definition of fascism. How convenient as BBC bosses came under fire for giving fascist leader Griffin a platform he had been dreaming of for years.

Throwing all the commonly held views of fascism and a bit of selective history into a heap, the BBC article leaves the reader with the view that it is impossible to give an answer. Is fascism racist? Yes, but so was the British Empire and that wasn't fascist. Is anti-semitism the defining feature then? But anti-Jewish propaganda was not central to Mussolini's fascism, whereas it was to Hitler's National Socialism.

Is Fascism totalitarian? Yes, but so was Stalin's regime in the USSR. Is it revolutionary? Well, in the sense that Hitler and Mussolini called themselves revolutionaries. But then many supposed fascists, like Spanish dictator Franco, were explicitly Catholic traditionalists. Is it "socialist" or even "anticapitalist" as the Nazis cynically claimed to be? Only in the sense that it condemned economic liberalism, international high finance and practiced huge state intervention as a preparation for war. But today some fascist parties support open markets and neoliberalism.

By throwing up all these contradictions and not attempting to answer them in any serious way, the BBC's cynical article trivialises this most serious of subjects and presents the reader with the stupefying conclusion that fascism is just a word:

"The clearest problem in the definition of the word 'fascist' is the very wideness of its application over the years. There is a plethora of uses from Rick in the Young Ones deploying it as an insult, to the Oxford English Dictionary's differing definitions '(loosely) a person of right-wing authoritarian views' and 'a person who advocates a particular viewpoint or practice in a manner perceived as intolerant or authoritarian'. Broadly speaking, in political discourse, it is a 'boo word', a term used more for purposes of condemnation than precise categorisation."

The reason for this wilful confusion and the resulting scepticism (the answer to the question what is fascism – "there is no answer" says one headline in the piece) is that it adopts a hopeless method of analysis– the method known as empiricism.

"Facts" – like the ones set out in the BBC article – are dealt with in isolation from one another, particular examples cited against one another rather than attempting to integrate them, the article tries to give a formal definition of the idea of "fascism" rather than looking at the real evolution of historic fascist movements. The only general conclusion the BBC draw is that fascism is the opposite of liberal democracy.



Supporters of youth group Revolution fighting the EDL in Manchester

The purpose of their entire piece is to dissociate fascism from classes, from the class struggle and above all to free capitalism from all responsibility for fascism. But in fact the most basic look at the subject – if it were undertaken in good faith – would reveal that the very period when fascism arose, became a mass phenomenon and triumphed in Italy and Germany was a period of intense capital economic crisis and a revolutionary threat to capitalism. Whenever it has gone through a revival on a smaller scale sin the Second World War, it has accompanied the more severe periods of economic and social crisis.

What the BBC discussion ignores completely is that the first target of any fascist party, once it becomes a mass force, is the working class and its organisations, our trade unions as well as political parties. When fascism comes to power it systematically destroys our organisations, not simply making them illegal but hunting down, imprisoning, torturing and assassinating working class leaders and activists.

Thus after Hitler came to power in 1933, in the first three months of the state of emergency declared after the Reichstag fire 25,000 labour movement activists were arrested by the Prussian police and an even greater number by the storm troopers of Hitler's SA and SS.

In Berlin the Nazis carried out systematic raids in the working-class districts, housing estates and factories. Communists, Social Democrats and trade union groups who planned to work illegally as they had done during Bismarck's 19th century anti-socialist legislation, were discovered by sealing off housing blocks and searching them

flat-by-flat. Local SA groups often knew the working class militants, hunt them down and set up their own 'private' concentration camps to torture and beat information.

Yet not a word is said of all this on the BBC website. That is enough to convict its liberal authors of being in Marxist terms ideologists, of using ideas to cover up rather than to understand reality.

The only method of analysing fascism which can make sense of its undoubted contradictions, its many varieties and the different stages of its development, is the Marxist method. This dialectical and materialist method enables fascism's opponents to understand, fight and destroy it. It understands fascism as arising from the central social conflict, unavoidable whilst capitalism lasts, which is the struggle between classes. It understands fascist movements as a combination of certain classes which serves the interest of a particular class at the crucial moment – the capitalist class.

Capitalism and liberal democracy

Liberal democracy is not – as the neoliberal ideologists claim – an ever-present accompaniment to free market capitalism. In the time of capitalism's early development (the seventeenth to the twentieth century) in most countries there was no universal suffrage. The "rule of law" did not protect the rights of the workers and peasants (i.e. the great majority of the people). Certainly the English, American and French Revolutions, which opened the road to capitalism and eventually established the bourgeoisie in power as a new ruling class, publicly proclaimed democratic ideals – and for short periods democratic rights were secured by the lower middle classes and the working classes who made these revolutions on the streets.

But in Britain, America and France the bourgeoisie soon turned on the lower classes and restricted their rights. Only later when the workers' movement became a mass phenomenon, when women and black people created mass movements for equal rights, were truly universal suffrage and civil rights established. And when they were, the real levers of power remained hidden behind a facade of parliaments and courts. Yet under dictatorial regimes as well as liberal bourgeois ones, capitalism developed and flourished – just as it is doing in dictatorial China today.

The bourgeois state is not and never was inherently and intrinsically democratic. The capitalists certainly need the "rule of law" to enforce property rights between themselves and over the masses. Crime, corruption, and plunder by state officials have to be kept under some control or contracts between businessmen and with the workers could hardly continue. But for all this the state is not a neutral arbiter between the classes.

Nor are its elected parliaments or its jury courts even the essential features of this state. They can and have repeatedly been dispensed with when the class struggle reaches a level that cannot be controlled by normal means. And even these "normal means" include, as well as laws and rights, the army, police and security forces, the "special bodies of armed men" which Marxists insist are the bedrock of the bourgeois state. These are invariably deployed on the side of the capitalists. In a strike they defend the "right to work" of the scabs, but when have sacked workers ever been escorted back to their jobs by the "impartial" forces of the law?

In times when economic crises are mild and the bosses' profits secure, when the workers' leaders are tolerant of or even enthusiastic about capitalism, then bourgeois democracy has great advantages for the capitalists. It allows their own factions and parties to argue amongst themselves and compete for office, without opening them to an attack by the working class. This acts as a gigantic safety valve for the class struggle, channelling it into collective bargaining between the multitude of employers and union leaders and periodic elections where the 'worst' that can happen is that a reformist workers' party will win office and then only tinker with the system.

But during all major crisis periods, like those between the first and second world wars, or like the 1970s and 1980s and the new period of capitalist crisis that has opened up today, the democratic safety valves start to fail. When economic equilibrium is repeatedly disrupted, and with it the balance of class forces that the democratic system is meant to ensure, the "normal" methods of control- the four or five yearly alternation of parties in government, the legalised force of the police and the courts – no longer suffice to control the working class and the middle classes.

The workers start to lose their faith in reformist parties when they cannot assure reforms and start to negotiate the surrender of past gains to the capitalists. When the skilled workers see their wage differentials and privileges eroded and when they too lose their jobs, pensions, savings and houses, they stop seeing capitalism as something they have a stake in. In such conditions the reformist parties are greatly weakened and thrown into confusion, left wings develop in them, or split away from them, and what was previously a revolutionary minority can become a mass force, threatening the very existence of the system.

The middle classes are also radicalised by capitalist crisis – by the loss of their savings and pensions through inflation; by the loss of their businesses or professional careers. This most stable social base for capitalism and its parties in good times becomes enraged and maddened by its unexpected misfortune, turning to the left and to the right seeking an explanation and a solution. Large stable parliamentary parties tend to break up and the dangerous world of shifting coalitions makes a strong and decisive executive difficult. But the capitalists demand this and look to forces "above party politics."

The phenomenon Marxists know as Bonapartism emerges. Under the cover of an individual 'strong' leader – usually with a military background – the permanent elements of the bourgeois state (the army and the state bureaucracy) are unveiled and more and more freed of legal and parliamentary restraints. This regime claims to act as an arbiter between the conflicting classes and parties. In fact it supports the dominant exploiting class, even whilst it pushes aside their normal parliamentary and political representatives.

The severity of dictatorship imposed by such Bonapartist regimes varies depending on the stage the class struggle has reached and the relative strengths of the contending forces. If the power of the working class, expressed in parties and unions, is unbroken it may be just a cabinet of "economic experts," senior civil servants and army figures, called in by a weak and divided parliamentary majority. At its strongest it can be a savage dictatorship, imposed by military coup like the Chilean and Argentine dictatorships of the 1970s. Although many people call any such brutal dictatorships 'fascist', to define fascism in this way would make it impossible to understand what is specific about fascism, what distinguishes it from other types of military and secret police dictatorship.

Above all fascism has to be understood as a mass movement in a period of deep economic, social and political crisis for capitalism. Its road to power may be prepared – as was Hitler's – by a series of semi-Bonapartist and Bonapartist regimes, the last of which invites the fascists into power. But a mass movement – even a reactionary and counter-revolutionary one such as fascism – has to mobilise its masses around slogans that seem to offer them a hope of escape from their dire social and economic conditions – which are the product of capitalism and its crises. Hence fascism often assumes the guise of an anticapitalist, revolutionary, populist movement, combining its racist and nationalist fantasies with 'social' demands to fool the masses.

In this way fascism directs its attention to those classes or fractions of class-

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es who are victims of the capitalist system but whose social condition often makes it difficult for them to resist or even clearly identify their tormentors. What are such classes? First the middle classes – the "old" and the "new" petty bourgeoisie. The old – the owners of small businesses and workshops, the small farmers; the new – professionals, middle ranking government officials, lower managers and supervisory grades.

Second there are sections of the working class that have difficulty in building class solidarity – highly skilled workers whose trades are replaced by machinery, workers in smaller workplaces and offices, workers conned into thinking they are middle class professionals. Third – the permanently unemployed or unemployable, the criminals, what Marx called the lumpenproletariat. All of these classes or fractions of classes acutely feel the misery of capitalism in crisis. The petty bourgeois sectors feel themselves squeezed by the competition of the big capitalists: they fiercely hate the banks and financiers who are ruining them.

Fascism appeals to all these strata with a pseudo opposition to "the system" blaming foreign immigrants for unemployment, blaming foreign capitalists or Jewish finance or Islam for ruining the middle classes. A worked out pseudo scientific racism can be an important element, as anti-Semitism was for the Nazis but a whole variety of internal enemies (national and religious minorities like Muslims today) will do just as well. What is important is to deflect attention away from the capitalist class as a whole and to break class solidarity.

Fascism is in short a party of civil war against the working class in a period of deepening social crisis: one that does not await the decisive moment of revolution or counterrevolution to resort to force, but which does so regardless of legality, firm in the knowledge that the bourgeois state will at worst adopt a position of benevolent neutrality between the fascists and their working class adversaries but increasingly will give them logistical support whilst hampering the workers' organisations with the "full force of the law." Meanwhile sections of the capitalists – only at first a minority – become willing to fund the fascists and promote them in their media. Likewise top figures in the military and the police give them encouragement, training for their cadres and, at the decisive moment, weapons.

In times of crisis fascism attracts bourgeois support because it is necessary to combat a more dangerous enemy than reformist workers' organisations. Hidebound as these alter are by respect fro legality they can usually be dealt with by the legal apparatus of the state. Half a dozen policemen removed the Social Democratic government of Prussia in 1932, paving the road for Hitler's final march to power over the next six months. But a revolutionary party with mass support cannot be crushed just by state repression. It has to have its network of cadres ripped up out of the working class communities where they live, work and fight, and the capitalists can only do this if they have a powerful mass auxiliary to the police and the military: a force which has also established its roots in the communities and on the streets, and done this long before it is summoned to power by its capitalist masters. This is what confronted the Italian and the German ruling classes in the early 1920s and 1930s and is why they resorted to fascism.

But if the capitalists are to risk civil war and revolution – for this is what a resort to fascism means – they must crush not only the revolutionary left but the whole labour movement, for today's reformist workers, once their illusions have been shattered by the capitalists' resort to civil war, will be tomorrow's new generation of revolutionaries. Better to make a clean sweep.

Leon Trotsky brilliantly summed up the nature and purpose of fascism:

"At the moment that the "normal" police and military resources of the bourgeois dictatorship, together with their parliamentary screens, no longer suffice to hold society in a state of equilibrium — the turn of the fascist regime arrives. Through the fascist agency, capitalism sets in motion the masses of the crazed petty bourgeoisie and the bands of declassed and demoralized lumpenproletariat — all the countless human beings whom finance capital itself has brought to desperation and frenzy.

"From fascism the bourgeoisie demands a thorough job; once it has resorted to methods of civil war, it insists on having peace for a period of years. And the fascist agency, by utilizing the petty bourgeoisie as a battering ram, by overwhelming all obstacles in its path, does a thorough job."

"After fascism is victorious, finance capital directly and immediately gathers into its hands, as in a vice of steel, all the organs and institutions of sovereignty, the executive administrative, and educational powers of the state: the entire state apparatus together with the army, the municipalities, the universities, the schools, the press, the trade unions, and the co-operatives. When a state turns fascist (...) it means first of all that the workers' organizations are annihilated; that the proletariat is reduced to an amorphous state; and that a system of administration is created which penetrates deeply into the masses and which serves to frustrate the independent crystallization of the proletariat. Therein precisely is the gist of fascism.... (From *What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat*, 1932).

In this brilliant passage, Trotsky expresses the most fundamental essence of fascism, and draws from this the necessary conclusions. He identifies fascism's role as allowing finance capital to assume more direct control of the state, and shows that to do so the fascsists must mobilise mass forces to atomise working class and democratic organisation. It is then able to mobilise national resources for blatent wars of conquest. In this sense, Trotsky concluded, fascism is "the chemically pure distillation of imperialism", the worldwide system of finance capital its self.

But Trotsky identified another vital aspect in the growth of fascism – without which it could never prosper: the mistakes and crimes of the leadership of the workers movement – not only those of the reformists who tie the unions and the parties to defending and preserving capitalism even when it is in mortal crisis, but also false policies pursued by the supposedly revolutionary organisations which organise the most militant and class conscious workers. Without this systematic misleadership fascism could never become the decisive force.

"The gigantic growth of National Socialism is an expression of two factors: a deep social crisis, throwing the petty bourgeois masses off balance, and the lack of a revolutionary party that would be regarded by the masses of the people as an acknowledged revolutionary leader. If the communist party is the party of revolutionary hope, then fascism, as a mass movement, is the party of counter-revolutionary despair. When revolutionary hope embraces the whole proletarian mass, it inevitably pulls behind it on the road of revolution considerable and growing sections of the petty bourgeoisie. Precisely in this sphere the election revealed the opposite picture: counter-revolutionary despair embraced the petty bourgeois mass with such a force that it drew behind it many sections of the proletariat...." (From *The Turn in the Communist International and the German Situation*, 1930).

Mussolini and the Birth of Fascism

In the 1920s and 1930s Trotsky not only correctly analysed the class nature of fascism but advanced the only tactic to defeat it – the workers united front – and an overall strategy: the struggle for working class power to resolve the crisis. We can see how he did this in the case of Italy and Germany and we can learn how to prevent fascism becoming a mass menace in the years of crisis ahead.

Before 1914 the future fascist dictator Benito Mussolini was on the left wing of the Italian Socialist Party. He was the editor of *Avanti*, the party's official daily.



Benito Mussolini and Fascist blackshirts during the March on Rome in 1922

He had even been imprisoned for internationalist opposition to the Italian colonial war in Libya in 1911. Yet in 1914 he came out in support of Italy joining the war on the Franco-British side. He was expelled from the party with a small group.

In 1919-20 a massive revolutionary wave swept Italy. The factories in the north were occupied; the peasants occupied the great estates of their landlords. But the workers were faced with the lack of a revolutionary party such as the Bolsheviks in Russia. The reformist union leaders engaged in outright sabotage. The leaders of the Socialist Party combined verbal revolutionary fireworks with utter passivity when it came to leading a struggle for power. When a revolutionary situation came in 1920, the reformist union leaders and left socialist parliamentarians both capitulated to the capitalist government.

The result of the missed revolutionary opportunity of 1920 was far worse than anyone could have foreseen. The employers had not smashed the workers. They had secured a deal, which in other circumstances would have been seen as a victory. But the working class and rural labourers had posed the question of power – a revolutionary insurrection against the state had been discussed openly – but their leadership had proved utter cowards, pulled them back and sabotaged the movement. It was a defeat brought about by the reformists and centrists (who vacillate between reform and revolution) of the Italian workers' movement. It left the workers confused and lacking any sort of leadership that could defend it.

On the back of this defeat, the fascists rose to power. In the towns they mostly comprised the middle or lower middle class, ex-officers and NCOs, white-collar workers, and students. In the countryside they were the sons of tenant farmers, small landowners and estate managers. They were financed by big landowners or industrialists. Both the police and the army actively encouraged the fascists, providing cadres and weapons to train the squads and vehicles to transport them, even releasing criminals from jail to join them with the promise of immunity.

With arms permits, refused to workers and peasants, and munitions from the state arsenals, the fascist Blackshirts had an immense military advantage over the workers' scattered and local defence organisations. As early as April 1919 fascists burned down the offices of *Avanti* in Milan, killing four people.

By the autumn of 1920 they were strikebreaking and smashing both the Socialist and the Populist unions and peasants' cooperatives. They began overthrowing the newly elected local councils where the Socialists and Populists had won a majority.

Fascist squads, dressed in black-shirted uniforms, used systematic violence to destroy the workers and peasants' organisations. Hundreds of union offices, labour halls party newspapers and offices were burnt down or looted. Thousands of leftists and worker militants, were savagely beaten up, forced to drink castor oil or simply killed.

The newly formed Communist Party, under the sectarian leadership of Amadeo Bordiga, refused to build a united front of resistance with the Socialist Party and the syndicalist unions of the CGL. They failed to form common fighting militia with the rank and file of peasant based catholic populists (the Popolari), who were also under attack. The Italian workers – communists, anarchists, socialists and popolari – did create defence groups at a local level, the arditti del popolo, and waged heroic fights against the fascist squadristi, who were backed by the state. But eventually – because of the disastrous policies of the working class parties, the class collaborationism of the Socialists who relied on the Liberals and the King to restrain Mussolini, and the sectarianism of the Bordiga-led Communist Party, the "two black years" of 1921–22 led to the triumph of Mussolini. Yet like Hitler ten years later he did not make a revolution: he was invited into power by the capitalists and landowners.

In 1922, under cover of the theatrical "March on Rome", the King and the Liberals in parliament invited the fascists into the government from which vantage point they unleashed a final wave of terror on the working class that took the lives of reformists and revolutionaries alike. In 1924 Antonio Gramsci and his supporters, who did understand the need for the united front, finally took the leadership of the Communist Party but it was too late. Gramsci was imprisoned in 1926 and died under guard in a Rome clinic in 1937 just before his supposed release.

Drawing the lessons

A decade later when the German workers were facing the ascent of Hitler and the Nazis, Trotsky was campaigning against the ultra left sectarianism of the Communist International which was now under Stalin's total control and was repeating Bordiga's errors. Trotsky pointed to the lessons of Italy:

"Italian fascism was the immediate outgrowth of the betrayal by the reformists of the uprising of the Italian proletariat From the time the war ended, there was an upward trend in the revolutionary movement in Italy, and in September 1920, it resulted in the seizure of factories and industries by the workers. The dictatorship of the proletariat was an actual fact; all that was lacking was to organize it, and to draw from it all the necessary conclusions. The Social Democracy took fright and sprang back. After its bold and heroic exertions, the proletariat was left facing the void." (*What Next?*)

He went on to point out the terrible punishment that comes from breaking off and disorganising a revolutionary offensive by the working class.

"The disruption of the revolutionary movement became the most important factor in the growth of fascism. In September, the revolutionary advance came to a standstill; and November already

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witnessed the first major demonstration of the fascists (the seizure of Bologna). True, the proletariat even after the September catastrophe was capable of waging defensive battles. But the Social Democracy was concerned with only one thing: to withdraw the workers from under fire at the cost of one concession after the other."

How did Hitler come to power?

In the German general elections of May 1928, whilst the mid-1920s boom was in its final phase, the Nazis national score was only 2.6 per cent.

Then, in October 1929 came the Wall Street Crash. US banks and investors suddenly called in their loans, there was a huge credit crunch and German banks and industrial enterprises started to go bust. In September 1929 1.3 million were already on the dole but a year later the number had shot up to three million.

The reformist Social Democrats (SPD) and the Catholic Centre Party were in a coalition government when the crisis really hit Germany in 1930. This was to prove the last government that could command a majority of members of the Reichstag, Germany's parliament. The ruling class was convinced such a government would not take harsh enough measures against the working class, but the SPD-Centre Party had a majority in the Reichstag. What to do? The government was simply dismissed in a "constitutional coup" by the right wing monarchist president Paul von Hindenburg. Henceforth the Weimar Republic was on its deathbed. Three governments, each more Bonapartist than the last, quickly succeeded one another.

On 29 March 1930 Hindenburg appointed "financial expert" Heinrich Brüning as Chancellor. With no majority in the Reichstag he had to rely on emergency decrees, using Article 48 of the Weimar Republic's constitution. However when the Reichstag rejected Brüning's massive cuts budget he again used a presidential decree to dissolve the Reichstag and call new elections.

The September 1930 elections were a total shock. Whilst the vote of the Communist Party – the KPD – went up from 10.6 to 13.1 per cent, this was dwarfed by the horrendous rise in support for the Nazis, from 800,000 votes in 1928 to over six million in 1930.

Meanwhile the SPD deputies "tolerated" the Brüning regime's Bonapartist government, using the argument that it was a "lesser evil" than Hitler. Thus they abstained on all its measures such as cutting the state budget and the workers' welfare provisions. In short they took responsibility for the effects of the capitalist crisis in the name of defending democracy. Rather than



Adolf Hitler with SA members in the 1930s

throwing the blame for the crisis onto the bourgeois parties and mobilising workers' opposition to it, the SPD left it to the Nazis and the Nationalist Right to pose as the major opposition to the regime.

The Communists (KPD) should have been able to play the leading role in the working class fightback, putting the SPD and the union leaders on the spot and either forcing them to break with Brüning and support effective action or risk losing their mass base to the Communists. For this the crucial tactic was – just as in Italy – the united front: calling for unity in action by both workers' parties and the trade unions for clearly specified immediate goals. These should have included resistance to Brüning's government and the employer's attacks and to Hitler and the Nazis' attacks on all the workers' organisations.

There needed to be no confusion of party banners in some sort of single antifascist identity. The different goals of the parties – working class power, the different roads to it, reform or revolution – was critical questions and should not be hidden from the working class.

But the Communist International and its dominant force, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, had succumbed to Stalinism in the years 1923-28. From 1928 it had adopted the self-defeating theory that Social Democracy was itself was a variety of fascism ("social fascism").

Stalin, and the leadership of the KPD under Ernst Thälmann, insisted that the united front must be built only "from below", with no agreements made between the SPD and KPD leaderships at national or local level. It seemed nearly everyone was some sort of fascist. Indeed fascism was already in power in Germany in the person of Brüning. This was a disastrous approach because it suggested that Hitler was only a variety of the same thing – anti-working class policies and police repression.

As Trotsky said, for all its leftism, this was a defeatist posture. It suggested that it did not make any difference whether the workers organisations existed or not. For that was the difference between Brüning's regime and Hitler's. It was of course no credit to Brüning's benevolence. It was simply that for Hitler and the Nazi's to establish themselves in power meant the annihilation of the whole workers' movement.

Instead of fighting for a united front, the KPD set up a series of its own 'pure' 'revolutionary united fronts' – the Red Front Fighters League (Rotfront Kämpferbund) and the Antifacist Action (Antifa). These were open to individual SPD members, but refused any organised coordination with the SPD's large militia, the Reichsbanner. Instead, Thäl-



Nazi *Sturmabteilung* or Storm Troopers

mann argued that a "revolutionary united front policy – that means relentless struggle against the social fascists of every hue, above all against the most dangerous 'left' forms of social fascism." By the latter Thälmann was attacking precisely those who were arguing the necessity of a united front of the SPD and the KPD to resist Hitler: including the supporters of Trotsky in the International Left Opposition.

The International Left Opposition's goal was to win the KPD from its suicidal sectarian position on the united front, to replace the Stalinist leadership of the KPD and the Communist International, and thus enable the millions of revolutionary workers in and around the KPD to fight for the workers' united front against fascism.

For Trotsky the united front was far from being a call for the KPD and the SPD to sink their differences on the way capitalism could be abolished – reform or revolution. Indeed Trotsky insisted that the true alternatives posed by the economic crisis were fascism or workers' power. It was therefore vital for the communists to win the majority of the working class away from the reformist SPD if the unfolding revolutionary crisis was to be resolved by the workers taking power.

In December 1931 the leaders of the SPD launched what they called the Iron Front for Resistance against Fascism. This coalition was based on the large SPD party militia, the Reichsbanner, the SPD youth organisation, the trade unions but was also a bloc with the small and declining liberal parties, religious leaders and celebrities. The Iron Front mainly held mass rallies and demonstrations but its SPD component did engage in defensive battles in the streets of the working class quarters against the Nazis. In fact, because they still held the regional government of Prussia, the SPD believed that with its large and well armed police force it was safe to continue with its purely legal and constitutional strategy. Let the Right Nazi's break with legality, they reasoned, and then and only they would they be justified in resorting to revolutionary measures like a general strike or seizing power.

Trotsky correctly saw through the "Iron Front" and the weakness of the SPD's legalist strategy:

"In case of actual danger, the social democracy banks not on the "Iron Front" but on the Prussian police. It is reckoning without its host! The fact that the police was originally recruited in large numbers from among social-democratic workers is absolutely meaningless. Consciousness is determined by environment even in this instance. The worker who becomes a policeman in the service of the capitalist state, is a bourgeois cop, not a worker. Of late years, these policemen have had to do much more fighting with revolutionary workers than with Nazi students. Such training does not fail to leave its effects. And above all: every policeman knows that though governments may change, the police remains." (*What Next?*)

Meanwhile the Nazi offensive grew and grew. With Ernst Röhm at its head, the Nazi party's militia, the SA (*Sturmabteilung* or Storm Troopers) went on the rampage, staging a series of provocations aimed at the Communist Party's Red Front Fighters and the Social Democratic Party's *Reichsbanner* militia by marching into their strongholds and starting violent confrontations. Attacks on Jewish shops and Jews in the streets was a central activity. The death toll mounted. By the end of 1931 the SA had suffered 47 deaths but the Red Front Fighters around 80, mainly due to the fact that they had less access to arms. The Nazis were well funded by a number of big industrialists and had sympathisers in the army.

By 1932 industrial production slumped by 40 per cent from its 1929 figure and five million workers had been thrown on the dole. The middle classes saw their small shops and factories go bankrupt. German society sharply polarised. At the end of 1931 the Nazis membership had soared to 800,000. Hitler received funds from the big industrialists and was able to form a front with the more reactionary nationalist bourgeois parties. The death toll form the SA's violence rose to a peak during Hitler's presidential election campaign.

In the final round on 10 April Hitler received 13.4 million votes. He lost to Hindenburg (53.0 per cent to 36.8 per cent) because the latter got the votes of the SPD (again with the lesser evil argument), plus the Centre Party and various smaller liberal parties. But Hitler's huge vote was more than triple that of the Communist Party candidate Thälmann (10.2 per cent or 3.7 million votes). By this time, the Nazi party had just over 800,000 members whereas the KPD had just 287,000.

Three days after the presidential elections, Brüning enacted a decree which banned all paramilitary organisations: the SA, the Red Front and the Reichsbanner. But in less than a month he was the victim of a palace coup and Hindenberg replaced him with the Prussian aristocrat Franz von Papen, who immediately re-legalised the SA. Under von Papen the Nazi storm troopers operated with impunity as far as the police were

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Communist leader Ernst Thälmann (left) in front of parading troops of the antifascist Red Front Fighters League, Berlin, June 1927.

concerned. The Berlin chief of police reported 461 battles in which 82 people were killed and 400 seriously injured between 1 June and the end of July alone.

The key tactic was to stage armed SA marches through working class districts. The results were usually a number of fatalities and assaults on working class party and newspaper offices and meeting halls. They did not go unresisted. On 17 July they attempted to march through Hamburg's dock district of Altona, a stronghold of the CP. This time it was the Nazi columns that met a hail of bullets from the Red Front Fighters. Their march was put to flight.

This was a deliberate set up by Von Papen. He had personally authorised the Nazi march on Altona. He immediately announced that since the SPD-led Prussian regional government had not been able to maintain order in Hamburg, he was removing it from power and of appointing himself in its place.

Despite having argued that Prussia was the working class fortress, and any attempt to take it would justify revolutionary defensive actions, when Von Papen dismissed the Prussian government the SPD and trade union leaders capitulated without a fight. The Communist Party's call for a general strike was correct, but since it was less than a year since it had voted with the Nazis (!) and the right wing parties to remove the Prussian government, this hardly had any effect on the shocked and demoralised SPD rank and file.

Under Von Papen's regime Hitler stepped up the reign of terror on the streets. But this produced a certain revulsion and in the November general elections (called by Von Papen to try to get a Reichstag majority – in vain) the Nazis lost two million votes and were smaller than the combined total of the votes cast for the workers' parties. Some businessmen lessened their support and the party faced bankruptcy. Victory seemed to be slipping away.

But it did not happen. Instead the Bonapartist clique around Hindenburg decided to oust Von Papen and replace him with a short lived regime under General Schleicher. He attempted to split the Nazi's party by winning the leader of its "left" wing Julius Streicher to enter a coalition headed by Schleicher. But Hitler squashed this revolt.

Nevertheless the ruling circles and the Nazis were in disarray. Their fear, above all, was that the working class parties, the SPD and the KPD, might finally awake to their danger and unite their forces. There is no doubt that this would have changed the entire consciousness of the working class, rousing it to struggle. Here was the last chance.

A united front would at the same time have divided a still uncertain ruling class and indeed the Nazis too. But nothing happened beyond local united front initiatives – though these always created massive enthusiasm from SPD and KPD workers alike. The tiny persecuted Trotskyist forces played a vital role in this. But it was not enough. On 30 January 1933, Hindenburg, having exhausted all his other options, appointed Hitler as Chancellor.

The SPD did nothing, waiting like frightened rabbits in the headlights of an oncoming car. The KPD too issued calls for a general strike but could not organise it. The Red Front was unable to do anything against the combined forces of the police and the SA. Again only local and heroic resistance occurred. The strongest Labour movement in the advanced capitalist countries was crushed virtually without a fight.

Hitler had shown that in conditions of capitalist crisis it was possible to combine a "legal" strategy of elections with violent street confrontations. This was because a large and growing part of the ruling class and the military wanted to deal with the working class movement in a decisive manner. Like Mussolini he did not make a revolution but was invited into power by all the key figures of bourgeois politics and the army. But even then his success was not inevitable. It required another ingredient – the same one that had allowed fascism to grow into a mass force – a disastrous failure of the leadership of the working class. Only this allowed Hitler's strategy to work.

The key lesson is not simply that the working class must form a united front to block the road to fascism. If such a united front adopts the reformist strategy of simply defending democracy and renounces the struggle for power, if its revolutionary element renounces the struggle to defeat the reformists and replace them as the key leaders of the mass worker movement, then it will not defeat the ruling class and its fascist agents.

The lessons for today are crystal clear. Everywhere that fascism is emerging in the current economic crisis, the working class needs three things: a clear fight for the workers' united front at every level of the movement to coordinate and lead the strongest possible class resistance to fascism, an antifascist militia that can resist the fascists' attacks and terror against workers and minorities, and above all a revolutionary party that can utilise the social crisis to direct the workers' struggles against the system itself, taking the power, destroying the capitalists' rule and the very conditions that give rise to fascism in the first place.