Dear Comrade Trotsky:

I communicated the contents of your letter to my colleagues in the party executive. We are all, like you, agreed in our estimate of the extreme seriousness of the situation for France, and, consequently, for the international proletariat. We find only natural, therefore, an exchange of correspondence which, in spite of our differences of opinion, permits us to establish major analogies in our perspectives. We are, moreover, sufficiently free from nationalistic prejudices not to find in any way “out of order” a letter from a Marxian militant so experienced as yourself. It is up to us to force ourselves to see things as they are, and to determine honestly wherein the results of our observations coincide with your political conclusions or wherein they noticeably diverge. The only difference which seems to us to result from a comparison of your letter with our estimate pertains, perhaps, as in 1935, to the more or less rapid rhythm of predictable events: we know that the crisis approaches; but it can be advanced or retarded in accordance with the unfolding of international events upon which directly depend the situation in our own sector. And we should have been gratified if your letter had taken into account the feverish preparation of the general conflict between the imperialist camps and had made some approximation of delays in the light of that perspective.

However, in any case, the necessary task remains the same: to forge a revolutionary vanguard ready to pose the question of the conquest of power and to lead the working masses along the road of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The militants gathered around the PSOP have this formidable ambition. They have already gone through two
selective tests: the September crisis proved their loyalty to proletarian internationalism; the November 30th general strike proved their capacity for direct action. These comrades do not have, certainly, the same rigorous and definitive judgment as yourself on the militants whom you mention with an underestimation of their political capacity, perhaps as a result of similarities or differences in tendency which today seem to us secondary. We have, in effect, constituted with them an International Workers’ Front against the war, and it is the platform and aim of this united front that should be submitted to the Marxian critique rather than the signature of this or that personality.

But your sharp estimate of our comrades of the POUM will surely arouse unanimous protests among our militants, for to us, who have lived close enough to the events since July 1936, it is not “the fright of the POUM before the petty-bourgeois public opinion of the Second or the Third Internationals or of the anarchists” which is the source of the collapse of the revolutionary vanguard; but the concentration of the efforts of British-French imperialism, of Italian-German imperialism, and also those of the Stalinists. The results of a vanguard policy do not, alas, have the same fulness in a period of the retreat and depression of the labor movement as in a period of advance. But, for ourselves, we have drawn from this tragic experience the following lesson: a bold and decisive working-class strategy can, under favorable circumstances, have an incalculable range. There are indeed times when one must go “to the bottom and to the end”. We lived through them in June-July, 1936; we will not forget them.

Another question is posed in your letter: that of the “fusion” of our party with the French section of the Fourth International. The “negotiations” were stopped with fusion proposals which we could not have considered without violating the firm feeling of our militants, to whom the question of our affiliation to the Fourth International was put during our founding convention (July 16-17, 1938) and who almost unanimously rejected it. This decision and this attitude should not, moreover, take on the alarming character which you imagine. We defined the programmatic basis and charter of a revolutionary, internationalist socialist party, and a democratic constitution. All militants in agreement with our principles and the democratic guarantees which we offer belong in the PSOP, where they will themselves forge the instrument of liberation which was missing in June, 1936. This is entirely understood by the communist and socialist militants who are joining us, and moreover by the minority of the POI, which has just taken its place in our ranks. But we want to speak frankly to you, comrade Trotsky, about the sectarian methods which we have observed around us and which have contributed to the setbacks and enfeebling of the vanguard. I refer to those methods which consist in violating and brutalizing the revolutionary intelligence of those militants – numerous in France – who are accustomed to making up their own minds and who put themselves loyally to the school of hard facts. These are the methods which consist in interpreting with no indulgence whatever the inevitable fumblings in the search for revolutionary truth. Finally, these are the methods which attempt, by a colonization directed from without, to dictate to the labor movement attitudes, tactics or responses which do not come from the depths of its collective intelligence. It is in large part because of this that the French section of the Fourth International has shown itself absolutely incapable not merely of reaching the masses but indeed even of forming tried and serious cadres.

If the question of fusion with the POI (majority) had been posed, it would have involved as a pre-condition a discussion relative to these methods from which the labor movement has too much suffered. Since serious differences exist between the POI (majority) and the PSOP why propose fusion? If the proposal is sincere, do you think that we will abandon our preference for a revolutionary party, with a democratic
constitution, which is capable of directing its own affairs? And if the proposal is not sincere, it would be better not to insist on it: confronted with the mighty political organizations of the working class and the bourgeois repression we have something else to do besides spending our time in this deceptive game.

Believe me that we much prefer – with no concern for personal or factional preconception (he who had such preconceptions at the present moment would be very mediocre) – the organization of a united front between the revolutionary groups which are separated by ideological differences (directed, for example, against the threatening imperialist war), rather than an illusory organic fusion carrying in its breast the germs of disorientation and speedy disintegration. To sum up, we attach very great worth to the fraternal collaboration of all revolutionary militants who are trying to subordinate their personal preferences to the exigencies of collective action. The process of the constitution of the revolutionary vanguard cannot be of the character of a mechanical operation.

In the measure to which we carry on our shoulders our share of responsibility before the working class, we are determined, comrade Trotsky, to prove ourselves not too inferior to the grave tasks which await us.

With our thanks, dear comrade Trotsky, we send our revolutionary greetings.

Marceau PIVERT
PARIS
Jan. 26, 1939