

A CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS A GENERAL DIRECTION FOR BIG FLAME

We have prepared this document after much discussion with other comrades in other BF branches - in particular Anne Dryden from Coventry and also Read from Leeds, Thomas from Sheffield, Wilson from Nottingham and Tredget from Liverpool. We hope to come together to draw out motions for conference on general directions for BF as well as on more specific struggles. If you are interested in helping, contact us via Suddes or Banks.

We think it is evident that Big Flame has suffered for quite some time from an insufficiently clear sense of what we should be doing and where we should be going as a revolutionary organisation. BF's lack of strategic direction has many roots, one of which has been the past refusal of the majority of BF members to adopt one or other of the 'grand strategies' presented at our National Conferences. Whatever the reasons may be, the North London BF members who have written this article all believe that the time has come to attempt a reassessment and, if necessary, redefinition of BF's politics.

Our own hope is that at this conference BF membership will feel able to adopt a more limited, 'ungrand' conception of political strategy that grows out of BF's traditions and is open to the constantly changing character of struggles in the coming period. What does this mean?

As a revolutionary organization we are, by definition, committed to the abolition of all forms of capitalist-patriarchal-racialist domination. But we are a long way off from the day when this complete transformation - including the overthrow of the State - is a real possibility. To get within striking distance of destroying the capitalist patriarchal system we believe the following developments need to take place:

(a) Those groups which are exploited and/or oppressed have to develop their own power and self-confidence, which can only come through their own self-activity and organisation.

(b) There has to be a widespread belief in the validity of socialist-feminist ideas, if the growing power and self-confidence of the oppressed/exploited is to develop to the point where they/we are prepared to overthrow the present system. Any attempt to develop and generalise socialist and feminist perspectives faces tremendous obstacles. There is the widespread identification of 'socialism' with state-collectivist societies of British style social democracy, and men's reaction to any threat to male supremacy posed by the growing power of women.

(c) We must create within the left a supportive socialist and feminist culture concerned with all areas of people's lives. Otherwise we shall go on repeating the cycle of demoralisation and disillusionment which has affected many who have found that life on the left does not help them to cope with and overcome the desperation and self-destructiveness of our lives under capitalism.

We believe that a revolutionary organisation like BF can play an important role in encouraging and strategically linking up these developments. More particularly we feel that - despite the many occasions on which socialists and feminists have found themselves at odds - socialism and feminism are not inherently in contradiction. The contradictions that do exist will not, however, disappear overnight. Nevertheless we think it is still possible for women to be involved in mixed political groups while remaining effectively active in the women's movement. The existence of a strong and autonomous women's movement is of course crucial to the development of any feminist perspective inside the left and the labour movement.

We feel, further, that it is important for militants/revolutionaries to join a national organisation which not only collectively develops political positions and forms of action but generalises their politics as well. Our positions develop from the national and international perspectives of the organisation as a whole. We also believe that national organisations can, despite frequent clashes in the past, contribute positively to local campaigns and particular sectors of work.

Our aim is to create in BF the kind of organisation which can overcome the main problems which have, to date, alienated many local/sectional militants from left groups. But we must never forget that we are trying to overthrow the state and we need organisation for that.

ORGANISATION OF BIG FLAME

As we see it, the 2 major problems in the internal organisation of BF are:

- (1) Success in intergrating socialism and feminism
- (2) Success in the development of a collective practice which enables members to be more than isolated individuals, each working in their own specific sector.

(1) Socialism and Feminism

The integration of socialism and feminism is both a theoretical and practical problem. We need a credible theory if radical feminists are not to win all the arguments when it comes to explaining the origins and forms of the oppression of women. It is also a practical problem which will determine whether or not women choose to remain in BF.

As has been said in *Beyond The Fragments (BTF)* the response of many on the left to feminism has been to agree to the addition of any area of 'sexual/personal' politics to existing (real?) politics. This tends to mean that there is no modification of the understanding of what socialism is, and that the relationship between socialism and sexual politics remains undeveloped.

At the last conference we passed overwhelmingly, with minimal discussion, a motion welcoming BTF, which asserted the need for: a cultural and political revolution within all existing organisations; a major rethink of theory and practice; and a discussion of the implications of the book for the role of women and men in BF. Yet a Big Flame day school on BTF was disappointing for many in that most of these questions were not raised.

If we are to develop the power of women in BF these issues need to be taken up fully: a start has been made in the women's pamphlet *Walking A Tightrope*. We need as well to involve men in taking responsibility for a confrontation with sexism both in themselves and in society in general.

(4) How We Intervene

The question of intervention remains central to ^{our} perspectives as an active revolutionary organisation. The assumptions about intervention often centre on when and in what struggles and with what demands. BF has always distinguished itself from crude interventionist tactics which take little account of the complex relationship between revolutionaries and people in particular struggles. We have already made some comment on priorities.

(i) Demands

Recently in BF there has been much emphasis on the question of demands, particularly in the BF Tendency documents, where the term transitional demand has been adopted.

Transitional demands are a legacy of Trotskyist politics and remain for most Trotskyist groups a primary way of developing revolutionary consciousness. In their terms these are demands which are injected into the struggle to mobilise and break the working class from economism and reformism towards a confrontation with the state in it's totality.

The problem with transitional demands as raised in various Tendency documents is that their conception still remains vague and undefined. More specifically it is difficult to assess the usefulness of such a transitional politics without answers to the following questions:

- a. What are the specific demands and what is their relationship to the state?
- b. Are the Tendency making a distinct case for their brand of transitional politics i.e. do they envisage some new form of demands based on a critique of the old Transitional Programme of 1938 or are they returning to these ideas?
- c. If we are being asked to consider a new transitional politics, what is the case for adopting this now, under Thatcher?
- d. Crucially, how are these demands introduced and at what level of struggle?

Obviously it is necessary to raise demands in a tactical way, but what has been distinctive about BF is that we consider it crucial that these demands are formulated and developed, as much as possible, by all those involved in a particular struggle. Too often demands are formulated outside the struggles and remain abstract and alien, therefore tactical not only towards the opponents: governments, state, bosses, T.U., bureaucracies etc. but unfortunately towards those in struggle themselves.

Transitional demands are also limited in that they tend strongly to focus on the negative, purely anti-capitalist nature of struggle and do little in themselves to introduce any kind of alternative vision of the society we want.

Traditionally BF has also argued for demands that are distinct from both transitional demands and reformism. These are realizable demands that increase power, self confidence and unity through the experience of winning. Finally, we consider that the formal demands presented in struggle have been and will often be less important than the way in which people fight to achieve them.

(ii) Socialist Alternatives

The points above are relevant to the demands for Socialist Alternatives, particularly the development of workers' plans. Discussion of the Lucas Aerospace Workers Plan has been the source of much controversy and confusion in BF. We would argue that workers' plans (such as those at Lucas) can, on an ideological level, demonstrate the irrationality of capitalism and allow workers to develop their own potential creativity. Practically, such alternatives can also contribute to the struggle against redundancies.

In an immediate sense, we need to confront the current ferocious attack on women which is so crucial to the ruling class offensive. Tory policy attacks women at every level, at work, in the home, in public life. Analysis and action need to be brought together to counter the attacks which are being carried out from day to day.

(2) Collective Practice

The problem of collective practice affects not only new groups like North London, but also the more established groups like Liverpool and Manchester.

The problem is not unique to BF, and must be seen in relation to the general crisis affecting the left in the current period of British Capitalism. The crisis is so deep that capitalism will continue to resort to more draconian measures unless it is forced to face a major fightback.

Many people on the Left are expecting a new wave of militancy such as that which deposed the Heath Government in the period 1972-4. But things are different. A shift in the mood of British politics, a workign class demoralised by unemployment and attacks on trades union organisation, as well as the major attacks on women, black people, the unemployed and 'unskilled' have intensified the divisions between people, and laid the foundations for a resurgence of radical right wing ideology and practice. It has been easier to describe the crisis, than for any of us to find clear focal points around which to organise and fightback.

(3) The Question of Priorities

At the last confernce we passed a motion on priorities which, however, left us with considerable problems in this area. These priorities amounted to:

- a. Struggles ^{against} the reproduction of capitalist social relations
- b. Struggles around production
- c. Struggles against the oppression of women, blacks and other groups; and
- d. Support for and solidarity with international liberation struggles.

Some people have argued that we agreed to too ny priorities, but it's hard to see how any one of them could be dropped. They seem to define what ought to be the concerns of any left organisation. An alternative suggestion would be a sliding scale of priorities worked out at the national level. This could, however, run the risk of being meaningless at the local level considering the regional variation in the possibilities for viable action.

Our alternative proposal is that each reasonably sized branch should try to ensure that it has at least one member working in each of the 4 areas mentioned above. In addition one area should be chosen on the basis of the local situation, with substantial numbers working together with others prepared to help out when the occasion demands. Such decisions can come only after a process of collective discussion through which members become convinced of the value of consolidating work in this area. This will most often involve directing people who are looking for an area to be active in, and will be especially useful for new members.

It is still necessary however, that we operate in terms of national perspectives and that we respond to national struggles as they emerge, such as the steel strike.

The Lucas experience, however, is not just about demands. The demand for production for use value may potentially be a better demand than higher wages, but so much depends on how the demand is fought for. The success at Lucas has as much to do with the way plans were fought for (ie through the involvement of shop-floor workers, rather than the use of outside experts in the formulation of plans) as it has to do with the plans themselves.

There still remains a number of problems with the notion of Socialist Alternatives, that BF needs to clarify. Often the term itself has been used in such a way that it collapses various different ideas into the one bag. Thus prefigurative ways of living and organizing are confused with workers' plans and the alternative economic plans of Benn and Co. There is also a danger in this of over-generalizing one particular element of strategy - either socialist alternatives or BF's old industrial strategy developed out of the deskilled workplace such as at Fords. It is clear that the model of the Lucas Aerospace Alternative Plan is not applicable to every industrial sector, nor to every workplace. It is hard, for example, to envisage how workers plans could be drawn up by the workforce at a fully automated petro-chemical plant. In our view we can only develop a strategy for the 1980s by realistically appraising the developments occurring in the working class rather than seizing on one element and applying it across the board.

Some people on the left of the Labour Party and in the CP are also proposing socialist alternatives. There is a possible danger that emphasising socialist alternatives may become, as it has at times for the LP and the CP, an abstract programmatic exercise simply devising ideal forms of organizing.

What is certain in the present period is the importance of socialist alternatives and workers' plans in the Public Sector, if people are not simply to defend what exists already.

(iii) In Conclusion

An important aspect of the way in which we intervene in general is that we should be prepared to accept the way we are fragmented under capitalism. We should attempt to draw connections between our own particular areas of intervention and all others. Thus someone working around the sphere of production should attempt to develop links with the sphere of reproduction and vice versa. The politics of class, race and sex should thus be brought to bear on each other.

(5) BF and the Labour Movement

Last year's motion on priorities identified industrial and union work as central. But it is unclear what fundamental change this implies. We have rightly abandoned the old model of external intervention around particular firms. IMG's strategy of getting members to take industrial jobs isn't the answer either, although if individual members want to take this line they should be encouraged and supported.

In so far as they can be all working members to our knowledge are active in their unions, standing as shop stewards and trying to get onto Trades Councils. We must recognize that the usefulness of this will vary with different unions and TCs.

What we can do, and must attempt to do more effectively, is lend support for limited periods in key national strikes. We need to re-examine our experience with Fords and the steel strikes to see how we can do better in the future.

One crucial area of work in relation to the labour movement is the organization of the unemployed. We need a lot more discussion on this. Formulating some proposals for working around the unemployed needs to be a priority at this year's national conference. Some trade unions are beginning to recognize the importance and existence of the unemployed, and to consider the possibilities of action. Union

action by itself, however, doesn't draw all of the unemployed into the struggle.

One other question to be discussed in relation to BF and the labour movement is our stance toward the Labour Party. While it is true that most working class militants will profess loyalty to the LP and Trade Union leaders, in the course of any struggle this loyalty becomes much less significant than rank and file initiatives. The *Theses on Reformism* presented at the last conference rightly stressed that reformism in everyday life, as a set of ideas and practices, is more important than reformist institutions. Recognizing therefore that an understanding of reformism is a key task for revolutionary socialists, doesn't mean that the point of our initiatives should be developments within the reformist institutions. Of course we support any moves toward greater democracy and accountability within the Labour Party, and would welcome a left Labour government - though there is little chance of this in the near future. But we must clarify our arguments against any nationalist-ically based strategy for an economy based on import controls.

There has been an attempt to present the choice facing BF as that of choosing between recruiting/aiming our propaganda at individual militants, or aiming it at those who make up "the fragments". But in fact the practice of most BF branches is already working where possible with LP and TU militants in anti-cuts campaigns and the like. Moreover, the posing of this choice implies the judgment that some people are inherently more worthy of our attention than others. Without underestimating the problems of the recent *Beyond the Fragments* Conference, we believe that BF can only gain from participation in any alliances or activities of activists which may follow that event, as well as contribute to the political development of such alliances.

INTERNATIONALISM

A significant function of a national organization is to take struggles beyond the local and sectoral to the international. An unresolved question is the way in which we engage in international solidarity work.

A typical attitude adopted by the left toward national liberation movements is one which is critical up to the point of victory, yet full of accusations that the struggle has 'sold out' from the point of victory onwards. At this conference we should reject the moralism which denies us the right to mix support for national liberation movements with such criticism of their politics, strategy or tactics as we feel necessary. At the last conference there was a motion which proposed a specific criticism of Irish Republicanism. Because of its poor wording the fundamental issue was not resolved.

One particular area where criticism may be relevant is in the long-term implications for women of liberation struggles. The way to do this is to support any attempts to raise such issues within the liberation struggles themselves, knowing that we cannot simply impose them from our position on the outside.

Part of the importance of *Beyond the Fragments* in challenging the Left and its failure to take up feminism, was stressing the need to develop a rich and imaginative socialist culture. There are, however, some people within BF who regard the whole BTF development as a diversion. But we feel it should be welcomed and supported as one part of the process of creating a genuinely socialist and feminist culture.

Socialist culture is often treated in a similar way to feminism - just another area to be tacked on at the end of our political shopping list. But we feel that the development of a socialist culture implies a whole assessment of how we work politically. We must work to make socialist propaganda and political activity in themselves entertaining and imaginative and attractive. This is the first step toward a pre-figurative politics.

CONCLUSION

This document argues for maintaining and developing the distinctive positions of Big Flame politics. What is happening throughout the left is evidence of how tempting it is to fall back on mechanical and defensive ways of organizing in the present period. Many of the struggles which BF has considered crucial, particularly those of women, black people, gays and youth, are treated more than ever as marginal, as much of the left looks to industry and the Labour Party as the arena for a fightback against the Tories. At the same time most of the far left groups are more and more reluctant to listen and learn from criticism of their practice, particularly those coming from feminists. It is essential that BF does not drift in the same direction.

We have to be realistic about the present situation. It isn't just a failure of politics - a lack of clear perspectives - which we face on the left or in BF. We can't draw more people into socialist politics simply by a new set of demands, however imaginative.

The problems for BF are the problems we face on the left in general. Most people do not see that involvement with socialist politics offers anything in the here and now. We won't be able to change this unless we come to grips with the real reasons why people remain demoralized and divided, rather than imagining where we think people are at.

We have to be able to relate to people as they are now, to listen to what they are saying, and to help them make sense of their experience, in order to struggle more effectively toward a different future. At the same time we have to avoid mystifying the experience of 'the masses' as always right.

The way people interpret their experience is distorted by the way life is determined in a racist, sexist, capitalist society. But only when we are able to build from this experience, and take people outward from it, will BF along with the rest of the left be able to grow. We think Big Flame has a great deal to offer in this process.

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