

TOWARDS A TRANSITIONAL STRATEGY: PROSPECTS FOR CLASS STRUGGLE

THIS DOCUMENT ATTEMPTS TO OUTLINE ASPECTS OF A GENERAL ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION, OUT OF WHICH SOME PERSPECTIVES FOR OUR WORK CAN BE DEVELOPED. WE ARE NOT ARGUING THAT EITHER THE ANALYSIS OR PERSPECTIVES CONSTITUTE A COMPLETE POLITICAL ORIENTATION OR 'GRAND STRATEGY'. THERE ARE OTHER ASPECTS OF THEORY AND PRACTICE WHICH ARE EQUALLY IMPORTANT. NEVERTHELESS WE FEEL THE ISSUES RAISED HERE POSE VITAL QUESTIONS FOR THE STRATEGICAL DEBATES NEEDED IN BIG FLAME

It is one of the distinguishing features of Big Flame that we recognise that there is a political crisis in the working class movement, beyond that of problems of leadership and organisation. This crisis has grown in proportion to the failure of the movement and the Left to adequately respond to the circumstances of recession in the capitalist world. The Tendency has argued however, that BF's own responses have been weak in key areas, particularly in attempting to provide some strategical alternatives to the dominant, but flawed, Labour Left, SWP and 'movement' models.

Big Flame is not alone in arguing that the existing models and forms of class struggle in Britain are inadequate and calling for a different political strategy. What has happened has been the emergence of series of parallel perspectives from different political positions arguing that existing defensive and economic models had reached an impasse in how far they could advance class struggle. In contrast they stress the need for offensive demands, stressing socialist alternatives and a wider audience for a more democratic socialist politics. Some pointers were made in this direction in BF's 'Labouring Under the Tories.' But there have been parallel reference points in locations as diverse as the Euro-Communist wing of the Communist Party, Beyond the Fragments and at the CSE Conference. (1)

The wide varieties of position involved should indicate that the mere assertion of the need for something different, offensive demands, socialist alternatives or otherwise, is no guarantee that they will be of use in developing class struggle in a revolutionary socialist direction. There are a number of dangers and weaknesses with the existing attempts to pose 'socialist alternatives.' Take for example Sue Slipman of the CP, writing in Marxism Today. She says "But our response has been for 'No cuts' and defensive battles rather than to try and examine the sort of services people would support." (2)

Fine...but then... "our objective is not just to save services but also to change the nature of the services through saving resources." (3) Not only does she implicitly accept cuts, she also blames the Left for destroying the Social Contract and letting in the Tories and 'aggressive individualism.' This approach shares with others further to the Left a contempt and failure to connect to the actual class struggle as it exists. 'Offensive' demands are thus counterposed to that struggle, attacked as solely sectional and economic, instead of a means of extending and building it.

Another danger is revealed in the document presented to the plenary of the CSE Conference 'Capitalist Offensive and Socialist Resistance,' by the Coventry-based 'Canley Gate' group. They argue:

"the differences between Labour and Conservative governments are predominantly ones of style and of rhetoric and not ones of substance."

and earlier:

"If this is the case, and there is not such a substantial difference between Labour and Tory forms of class rule,

it would be inappropriate for socialists to focus their struggle against the Tory or Thatcherite offensive, but should struggle against class rule as such, however difficult that may be, giving to the ~~the~~ opposition to the capitalist offensive a specifically socialist content." (4)

If the previous example of posing 'socialist alternatives' led to accomodating to a reformist strategy, the Canley one ignores the hold of reformism. 'Class rule' does not exist in any abstract and pure sense, but in forms mediated through existing class relations, in plain terms, through this Tory government and this Labour Party and allied reformist institutions. Without this understanding, 'offensive demands' are simply an ultra-left adventure without any tactical basis. Nomatter how many Tory policies were started by Labour, the differences ~~is~~ between the two parties arises less from programme and more from the relationships between the working class, the parties and other social classes.

These points have been for two main purposes. First, the Tendency does not argue for socialist alternatives in abstract, but in a context of a revolutionary intervention in class struggle. Second, such an intervention has to base strategical analysis on an understanding of the existing balance of class forces, as this determines the tactical orientation. Concretely this means that it is necessary to have some definition of the specific nature of 'Thatcherism.'

THE NATURE OF THE TORIES

This is not easy and we do not pretend to have any well-worked out formula. But it is necessary to be critical of some of the ways the Left has viewed the Tories. ^{The dominant} way has been to describe the Thatcherite policies as the latest in a series of tactical options for the British ruling class. (5) The problem with seeing the policies of governments in the 1970's as a succession of different tactics of the ruling class is that it fails to grasp the contradictoriness of the policies, between ideology and practice, different sections of the ruling class like finance and manufacturing capital ~~and~~ and so on. It also leads to an over-conspiratorial view of things, where policies are always the result of conscious ^{united} decisions.

The evolution of Thatcherism is certainly something more than a series of irrational blunders, as some on the Labour Left describe it. It emerged, primarily within the Conservative Party in response to the failure of traditional governmental policy within a Keynesian framework of state economic management. Grasping certain ~~some~~ elements of the crisis at an ideological and practical level, a radical right-wing alternative emerged, held together by monetarism. At a general level, control of the money supply is being used to deflate the economy severely, accepting conditions of slump and mass unemployment as a means of creating a later expansion on the basis of rationalised production, and increased productivity from a weakened working class. In this sense it is wrong to describe the Tory policies as de-industrialisation. This may be the effect if they they go badly wrong, but the intention is to revitalise and re-structure manufacturing Capital.

What is even more important are the means by which such re-structuring of the economy and social structure are implemented. There are two basic elements:

* An attempt to by-pass state intervention in collective bargaining and other aspects of economic management, defeating the working class through manipulation of market forces and political control of social expenditure (eg cash limits). The thrust for the necessary increase in prices and profits without wages catching up, is however held back by the uneven strength of shop floor organisation, especially in sectors less touched by unemployment. Therefore a necessary parallel policy

is anti-union legislation (ie the Employment Bill and picketing codes). As Glyn and Harrison point out, "legislation to reduce their power is intended to complement 'market pressures', " (6) particularly in preparation for the hoped-for economic expansion.

* Rolling back state services (welfare, education, health) with the double aim of diverting capital through cuts and creating two-tier provision (expanded private, reduced public) which will split the working class. The latter is sometimes referred to as de-composition. But the attack on and fragmentation of the working class is a combination of effects of cuts and a conscious policy of re-structuring in other cases (eg sale of council houses) and spread of private health schemes) which are aimed at producing a different kind of working class (ie, where where sections are dependent on private enterprise for social provision of needs).

A clear and well-developed individualist, free enterprise ideology is the cementing force of the policies. One example of the successful combination of ideology and practice is the proposed free-enterprise zones. In practical terms, the effect of a small number of these sectors is likely to be small. What is intended, however, is an exemplary effect, where the success of such ventures (which will attract employment within regions) act as a general boost to employers and Tory policies. at an ideological level.

It has been apparent by now that despite the steelworkers and other cases of resistance, the Tories have been largely successful in further weakening working class organisation and response to the recession. This continues the pattern of the Labour administration, but the greater virulence of Tory policies and the context they have provided for sharper attacks (ie through monetarism and increased unemployment) is resulting in more ruling class victories, with Leyland the most important example, but the recent acceptance of short time and pay cuts by Vauxhall workers on Merseyside an ominous pointer for future trends.

Success for the Tories cannot be measured solely at this level. It is widely recognised that monetarist policies are extremely dangerous to manufacturing capital itself. This is because of the contradictory effects of the slump, ~~which~~ were a long term prospect of increased production and higher profits is prefaced by an inevitable short term profit and production fall, reduction in borrowing, strong pound affecting exports and imports and so on. Industrialists and the so-called Tory 'wets' are therefore well aware of the potential consequences of Thatcherism. But it would be wrong to pose the evolution of Tory policy as a battle of ruling class factions. (7) Despite the noted excesses of right-wing ideology and its destructive effect on ruling class interests, both Tory moderates and employing interests are prepared to bide their time to see the effects of Thatcherism, notably its degree of success in 'disciplining' the working class. Despite being prepared to adapt to Labour Governments, the ruling class is historically and ideologically wedded to the leadership of the Tory party and the current strength of that leadership will ensure a relative, united public face. But this may crack and pressures for a policy reversal ~~may~~ will occur if the results do not come up to scratch. By then it is likely to be too late to reverse the recessionary trends and ~~the~~ significant sections of the manufacturing base will have been destroyed without the intended benefits to come. This is the dangerous game circumstances have forced the Tory leadership to play.

It should be clear from the above analysis that Thatcherism is in policy, and ideology a break from Labour, even from the centre-right leadership. While cuts, increased unemployment and monetary measures

35

were all carried out by Labour, its force and significance in ideological and practical terms are both weaker and in a different class context. There is no doubt that the Tories are eroding many of the limited gains made by the working class in the post-war period. This is seen as a conscious policy rather than as a reaction to the crisis that characterised Labour's abandonment of its reformist 1974 programme. In this sense the Tories are a different and more dangerous enemy to the working class.

LABOUR STRATEGIES

How therefore should we characterise the position of the Labour Party? It is necessary to distinguish the dominant centre-right leadership from the left. The centre-right is in a severe political crisis. In the post war period it has become associated with an attempt to manage the reformed capitalist system, without making any more fundamental reforms. This approach is called into question as it fails to respond to a downturn in the economy and corresponding political and social crisis. Unwilling to tackle the power of capital, it therefore becomes distinguished by the practice of controlling incomes and attempts to construct social compacts with the unions. The inherent instability of this perspective was the ultimate downfall of the Callaghan administration. Now, while the centre is at an impasse, the right led by Williams, Rogers and Owen can only respond by increasing its attacks on the Left. Both are united in their lack of anything to say about the fundamentals of tackling the crisis.

The Labour Left goes beyond managerial social democracy by its commitment to extending state intervention and the recognition of the necessity to direct private capital.

The Alternative Economic Strategy (AES) is the only serious alternative to monetarism at state level. In essence the AES attempts to combine an expansionist reflationary economic policy to stimulate production and return to full employment, with measures to extend planning through import controls, planning agreements and a limited degree of increased public ownership of major companies. The more perceptive versions add on the need to de-centralise accountability and information to avoid the drift to corporatism. Such measures would include some version of workers' participation, a Freedom of Information Act and parliamentary reforms to make government accountable to Parliament. (8)

What unites both approaches is a concern to control the existing capitalist state, an interventionist perspective that distinguishes it from Thatcherism. As revolutionary socialists we argue that even in its radical forms, such attempts are doomed to failure. Indeed proponents of the AES need only look at how national and international capital responded to and directed the last Labour Government, to see the immense problems of attempts to intervene in and control the capitalist state. In its early period of office, faced with pressures from workers, an expansionary consumer-led boom was instituted with some increase in living standards. Over the following period, Labour was faced with a flight of capital abroad, refusal of foreign credit, investment strikes, threats of withdrawal from economic and political planning and so on. It ended up having its domestic policies dictated by the IMF in return for a massive loan to bail out the balance of payments problems. In the wake of this retreat, Benn was sacked and the NEB wound down as a serious weapon of state intervention. In the knowledge of such opposition, the Labour Left argue for the necessity of a stage-by-stage introduction of the AES as part of a long-term transition to socialism. This is contrasted to the 'unrealistic' demands of the Far Left for instant confrontation and socialism. But there is little realism in carrying out measures that will inevitably lead to large-scale confrontation with capital, without the preparation necessary to win.

This lack of preparation derive from the two fundamental weaknesses of first believing it is possible to transform capitalism from within (including within national boundaries) and second because such reforms are still a top-down strategy that does not involve the mass of the working class.

LEFT PERSPECTIVES

Because revolutionary socialists base their approach on the self-activity of the working class, our problems of organising and perspectives are posed differently. Yet we also share an inevitable overlap of terrain of struggle. At its heart is the question of the state. In the last decade is examined, the declining fortunes of the Far Left can be strongly related to an inability to develop a political orientation at the state level and to the reformist organisations. This has been the case most clearly in France and Italy and to a lesser extent Portugal and Spain. In the periods of economic expansion the Far Left could tie into the sectoral, confident militancy of ~~the~~ different parts of the working class and its allies. Given the stagnation of the traditional reformist organisations, it could even take the lead on occasions. But the more the downturn developed into a long recession the clearer it became that economic contraction, ~~and~~ unemployment and cuts were closing the space for successful sectoral and local struggles. In this situation it also became clear that the Far Left had over-estimated the degree of radicalisation of consciousness, the permanence of new forms of organisation and the weakness of reformism. Of course, these were not the only weaknesses of the Far Left, but parallel problems like the relation of organisation to movements, inadequate forms of organisation and the 'crisis of militancy' should be situated within the context of weaknesses of general political strategy of a transition to socialism. (9)

We can see many of these problems in Britain. In our founding statement the Tendency outlined what we see as the weaknesses of an approach like the SWP's which fails to make any bridge between daily workplace struggles (given their undervaluing of other sectors) and the struggle for socialism. Even in a period of Tory government, in struggles against cuts and redundancies militants are faced with concrete problems of how to relate to local councils and national structures. This is why the AES ~~is~~ will become an increasingly important focus for opposition to the Tories. ^{Not only is} ~~it~~ is the ~~only~~ alternative to Thatcherism at state level, its programme relates concretely to the problems faced by the working class in a ~~recession~~ recession, even when the solutions are wrong. This is why the TUC adheres to a milder version of the AES, even though politically it lines up with the centre-right leadership of the Labour Party.

Revolutionary socialists cannot dismiss or by-pass the relation between local struggles and the state at national or local level, simply sticking to - no cuts, no redundancies etc. Nor can we ^{ignore} the fact that struggles take place inside a context of competing ~~the~~ economic strategies. It would be difficult to deny that an interventionist AES provides a better context for asserting working class demands, than the existing monetarism. Therefore BF's policy of the last Conference that "we are totally opposed to any plans coming from the Left for alternative ways of running the capitalist economy," is an denial of politics, or to be more precise of any tactical relationship between day-to-day struggle, reformism and the state. We will return to this relationship later.

These problems are of less immediate importance. In this early period of Tory Government, it is inevitable that defensive struggles are to the fore. Once again reality has proved more complex than the assumption ~~that~~ that the experience of Tory attacks would quickly create a mass working class response. Despite the resistance of the Steelworkers

and some other sectors, there has been no general reversal of shift to the right in society. Two factors underpin this. First, is that key ideological battles (on the unions, the role of the state etc) are still being won by the Right. Second, no systematic alternative has been put forward to the right-wing strategy that can mobilise the mass of the working class. Hence, while the militant sections of the class are united in their hatred of the government in a more fierce way than usual, the majority are pessimistic both about the prospects of resistance and the existence of solutions to problems like unemployment. These factors help to explain the uneven response to the May 14th Day of Action and the resignation of even militant sections of the workforce (eg steelworkers) to redundancies.

This is why it is wrong at this point in time to pose the demand for a general strike to bring down the Tories. It simply does not match up to the situation on the shopfloor and the communities and in avoiding the key problems of political perspectives and rebuilding organisation it tries a short cut that will not work. We have to work towards a situation where this demand can be posed out of a genuine class mobilisation on a mass scale. The mobilisation must start from the basic defensive struggles, primarily in defence of living standards and jobs, against the cuts and roll-back of services, and against the attacks on the unions. Within this process there are key perspectives for political advance of the struggle:

*Re-building a left-wing in the unions, that links reformist and revolutionary workers who are prepared to fight the Tories. While the form this takes will vary it is important to reject the idea that rank and file organisations should combine workers who are already conscious revolutionary socialists, whether a front for one party or not. Parallel to this is the building up of independent shop floor organisation that has been decisively weakened in the past few years. Vital in this respect are bodies like combine committees that can develop industry-wide perspectives.

*The development of classwide forms of organisation and demands that break the barriers being re-inforced by the Tories. This is particularly important in the public sector, cuts struggles and the fight against redundancies. Making worker-tenant, factory-community links necessitates breaking down political as well as physical barriers that create sectionalism, for instance council direct workers involving tenants in defence of jobs and services by broadening the scope of the struggle by questioning the nature of the service provided.

*The recognition that in the course of the crisis, Tory measures will increase the double-burden of sections of the population, notably women, black people and youth. This is centred round the changing nature of employment and the revision of relationships between work, services and community. The Left therefore needs to be particularly supportive of independent forms of action, demands and organisation that can strengthen each sector and thereby the whole movement.

*Within the defensive struggles, beginning to counter-plan for socialist alternatives in the spheres of services and production. Such work is vital for developing class confidence and willingness to take on the Tories, even when it is on a mainly propagandistic basis, as a pointer to the future.

THE SCOPE FOR SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVES

We therefore recognise that the scope for offensive demands that will be actually taken up and fought for will be initially limited. Nevertheless such demands based on the development of socialist alternatives are crucial even when restricted, for two reasons. They engage the Tories

38

on key ideological terrains where they are at present winning and in the process attempting to destroy any legitimacy that there are socialist alternatives. Second, they are challenging the limits of reformism which does not see the need to transform production or services like education. For both these reasons, such perspectives are vital in breaking the Tory-Labour cycle BF has referred to in 'Labouring Under the Tories' and Conference motions of 1979.

There are three main areas to such alternatives:

*Counter-planning in the workplace. This has been concentrated too much on workers' plans for alternative production on the Lucas model. With the spread of redundancies and new technology, the need for a variety of counter-planning (involving issues of control, skills, training as well as products) is emphasised. While the impact of such demands is bound to be limited by the anti-interventionist nature of the Tory government, it is vital to shift the working class movement from a reactive response to a general position of counter-planning for short and long-term offensive demands. Research centres and socialist centres can play an important role in giving Far Left militants access to working with shopfloor organisation, where we do not have a large enough base within the industry.

* Counter-Planning in the service sector and community: Socialist alternatives will be easier to develop and concretely fight for in these sectors (health, housing, education, welfare etc). This is because of the relative autonomy of parts of state institutions. The linking of defence to transformation of services is dependent on developing tactics for exploiting the contradictory features of the state machine. Central to this is a disjuncture between national and local state. Despite the cuts and Tory control of central funding, increasing numbers of local councils will be Labour-controlled and we have to use that situation to press for offensive demands, forcing the councils to provide fundings, for instance for community controlled childcare.

*Democratisation and accountability. The Far Left quite rightly rejects forms of participation in the system which mean taking responsibility for the running of capitalist institutions. But the need for greater democracy and accountability of public services are playing an providing a thread running through many struggles. This is particularly the case in the context of the centralisation of power in an ever-more closed and secretive state, identified for instance in the debate about nuclear power and weapons. For example it has proved very difficult to take struggles around police brutality (like the Jimmy Kelly case) any further than 'exposés' of the police, without some demands for democratic accountability. Such demands in these and other sectors can *once again* play an important role in exploiting the contradictions in the state machine. Also relevant in this sphere are demands for greater access to the media and information provision, that would for example tackle areas like the monopoly of media distribution that keeps radical publications to ghettos.

While struggles on these terrains under a Tory government will sharpen the ideological battle, they are unlikely to meet with substantial success given the nature of those policies. Therefore they have to be linked to a perspective of the return of a Labour Government. But the key question is - under what conditions? Within the anti-Tory mobilisation the Far Left needs to develop perspectives for socialist alternatives that can carry over into the period of Labour Government, sharpening the conflict between left and right inside and outside Labour. It is important

39

to consolidate a layer of militants in all sectors who have the perspectives to go beyond calling for the return of Labour and who realise some of the oppositional tasks of the working class movement under a Labour Government of any complexion.

TACTICS TOWARDS REFORMISM

Yet, any move towards a transitional socialist politics involves being clear on the tactical relation to reformism, particularly in its more radical, left wing forms. There are a number of basic reasons why any strategical thinking must connect these two spheres. Any demands or perspectives involve asking the question - how can they be fought for and won? For some on the Left, this is not a problem, as demands are simply mobilising devices out of which exposures and recruits can be made. If we are more serious we have to recognise that if you raise demands against cuts and for a new type of service, or against redundancies and for a workers' co-operative funded by the state, then you immediately have to come to terms with the political and economic context. And this effectively means dealing with Labour Councils, a Labour Government, as well as trade unions and Councils etc. There is the question of what kind of political alliances are necessary to make demands winnable, how to relate to Labour Movement institutions which are still usually dominated by reformism and how to combat and provide alternatives to reformist ideas and programmes like the AES.

Let's put this in a more concrete context. If Labour are returned, it would be unwise to believe that its character would be Left-reformist (dominated by Benn's forces etc). It is already apparent that the important victories on democracy at the last Labour conference were over-estimated, mainly because of the relatively small base of the Left in the unions. This in itself is a comment on the limited degree of extra-parliamentary/party organising carried by the Left. A future government would be likely to be a hybrid form where a radical programme co-exists with a divided parliamentary party, probably with a centre-left leadership. This will still present important opportunities for the working class movement to develop struggles which can impose certain demands. The pressure of the anti-Tory mobilisation and of the economic crisis make it very likely that important parts of the AES will form part of Labour's programme, supported by the unions. There will be tremendous pressure to reverse Tory policies, extending state intervention and increasing public spending.

While this is not in itself any great step forward, what is important is the altered framework for class struggle and the type of demands that can be fought for. Put in a nutshell our perspective should be locating counter-planning from below inside the varied forms of AES at local and national state levels. The inter-secting of these two processes offer some of the best opportunities for raising the level of struggle and its consciously socialist component. Let's take some examples. A company threatens closure, the combined committee has already developed a counter-plan. Over a period of struggle the company refuses to implement it. This gives the workers the possibility of using the momentum of the struggle to force the Labour Government to take it into state ownership, funding the plan; giving the further opportunity of fighting to alter the character of public ownership to more democratic forms. Another example. Using the context of some expansion of public spending, the women's movement and its allies can go on the offensive (as is tried in a more limited way now) for abortion facilities. Campaigns can be mounted for things like day-care centres, once again fighting for a transformation of the nature of the service provided.

It should be seen by these examples that we are not talking of a formal and uncritical support for the AES programme, particularly those demands which unite the bosses and workers (import controls), or involve workers taking responsibility for running private companies (planning agreements). Neither are we saying that the AES is the general-state level of strategy, while counter-planning is the local, micro level. What we are saying is that revolutionary socialists should fight within the working class movement for perspectives and struggles which push reformism to its limits and deepen its contradictions. We have to be clear in saying that any Labour Government will be forced to attack the working class if it will not confront capital, which it won't of its own accord. We should give critical support to those elements of the AES which can benefit the working class, defending them from attacks from the right; but give unremitting opposition to those that seek to shift the burden of the crisis onto ~~the~~ working people.

It would be wrong to present any of these events as a linear process, a simple progression. Strategy should not be dependent on the formation of particular governments or programmes and we have to prepare for defeats and setbacks. We are simply arguing what is thought to be a likely course of events and a context in which we think advances in class struggle can be made. It should also be stated that we are thinking in the medium term. A fully-transitional strategy has to have a more extended dimension, taking in particularly, relations with a Left Government, changes necessary in concepts of fighting for power and so on. The Tendency would like to see these questions taken up, but they are beyond our capacity to answer fully at the present time.

PERSPECTIVES FOR BIG FLAME

The perspectives and tasks of an organisation cannot be solely deduced from a general analysis. This is why we have referred more often to the tasks of the Far Left as a whole, for we are small component of it. In this last section, we want to try and situate a more specific orientation for Big Flame. A major factor determining this is the situation on the Left as a whole. The immediate prospects for any major re-alignment look poor. The onset of the Tories have accelerated a turn towards more conventional orthodoxies in organisations like the SWP and IMG, and the former keeps a cool distance from the latter's increasingly dispirited unity calls. While joint work in the many campaigns and rank and file organisations is still vital it is unlikely that any further shifts will take place.

This of course is one of the reasons why so much emphasis and hope is being placed on the 'movement' surrounding 'Beyond the Fragments.' We cannot here go into a full analysis of this trend, but one vital factor stands out. The description 'fragments' to describe the variety of political forces and activities encompassed is not just a physical term, it is also political. Those at the centre of BTF have not fully faced up to this. They rightly call for links between different struggles, combined with an exploration of the variety of socialist alternatives emerging out of those struggles. But, as we have argued, such alternatives can mean very different things and can be inserted inside different reformist and revolutionary strategies. Linking fragments in a way that has any meaning in the current situation therefore means making political choices, of tactics, strategy and alliances.

*These comments are made prior to the event at Leeds.

41

It is here that the refusal of general political organisation by the bulk of those involved in BTF becomes crucial. As we said in our founding Statement, "such an orientation is more than a refusal of general organisation of necessity it is also a refusal of strategy itself, of a programmatic intervention inside class struggles. By postponing programme, strategy and organisation onto a distant future or denying them altogether, they

therefore leave other political strategies unchallenged." We are not saying that BTF is useless unless it adopts a certain position on revolutionary organisation. But there is a contradiction between the position on linking fragments, developing socialist alternatives and rejecting general organisation. This contradiction is accelerated by the position of some of the forces involved who combine an intense hostility to the organised Left, with a desire for some substitute form of general organisation (eg a network of BTF groups).

Such alliances without perspectives will meet the same fate as the last similar initiative - the May Day Manifesto - which fell apart the first time it was faced with a major tactical decision at the time of the 1970 election, as Raymond Williams makes clear in the recent Journal article.

The limited success of the Fragments Conference illustrated some of these problems. That is why it is important for BF to intervene in the debates and initiatives. It is not a question of solely arguing for a revolutionary organisation, but for particular perspectives on what socialist alternatives mean and how struggles can be linked in a way that makes them an effective aid in combatting this Tory Government. Of course, we have plenty to learn on these questions, but that does not reduce the necessity to say what we can clearly.

BTF is the most important of a number of initiatives which are bringing together militants, some of whom are seeking a political alternative to existing revolutionary and reformist strategies. Many are involved in 'counter-planning' activities at a local or sector level. The growth of BF must be directed in areas which flow from our political perspectives. We would argue that one of our organisational orientations should be towards these militants. They are not all 'independent', nor all in white collar jobs. There are many in the Labour and Communist Party's and in the Far Left organisations, as well as factory and community situations. By stressing that a concern for socialist alternatives must be combined with building independent rank and file organisation, and the autonomous movements, Big Flame can act as a pole of attraction in a period when debate will be sharp, but organisational re-alignment unlikely. We should continue to argue for a genuine re-alignment of forces, while attempting to constitute Big Flame as a vital political core in any process of change.

Together with other initiatives, such an orientation offers modest possibilities for growth. Our ability to make an impact largely depends on whether external goals of activity can be translated into meaningful tasks of intervention based on the collective practice of local groups and commissions. The major role of the National Committee in the post-Conference period, should be to work closely with local groups and commissions to establish a clear number of interventions based on collective practice, in the context of Conference decisions on perspectives and priorities. Without clear political perspectives and consequent organisational directions, BF will be left to struggle for survival based on being a support network for a series of disparate activities that cannot in themselves provide the sense of political direction so vital for growth, as well as survival.

42

NOTES

1. See the debate around Hobsbawm's 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?' in Marxism Today and the articles by Slipman ~~xxxx~~ and Canley Gates below.
2. Sue Slipman, 'Thatcherism, A New Stage?' in Marxism Today, July 1980, p 28.
3. As above, p 28.
4. Canley Gates Cycle Club, 'The Thatcherite Offensive and the Socialist Response,' in CSE Conference Papers 1980, pages 8 and 2.
5. See for instance David Tettodoro, 'Analysing the Tories', in International (IMG), Spring 1980.
6. Andrew Glyn and John Harrison, 'Destructive, but far from mindless.' which is an analysis of monetarism and Tory strategy, in New Statesman, 27th June 1980, p 962.
7. See for instance, Andrew Gamble, 'The Decline of the Conservative Party,' Marxism Today, November 1979.
8. There is a useful discussion of the AES in all its forms, ~~in~~ by Alan Freeman, 'The Alternative Economic Strategy, A Critique', in International Spring 1980.
9. For an extended discussion of these themes, see Peter Anderson, 'The Crisis of the Revolutionary Left in Europe', in Revolutionary Socialism, Summer 1980. There are some interesting points also made in Daniel Bensaid, 'The Roots of the Crisis', in International Socialism, Summer 1980.