

THE STRUGGLE FOR A MASS POLITICS

In the past few years, there has been a tendency for the idea of mass work or mass politics to become identified with a particular group of people in BF seen by others or themselves as standing for a return to the theory and practice Big Flame was based on in the early-mid seventies. That model, based essentially on mass leafletting of factories by base groups of BF members backed up by sympathetic workers, in order to identify and organise round key day-to-day issues; and community organising, normally through area bulletins and placing of BF members in working class areas, has long bit the dust. We have never, however, dropped the use of the concept of mass politics, even when trying to find alternative methods of re-building effective intervention in working class struggles has proved largely unsuccessful. And this is right. In this short document I want to set out a case for renewing and modifying the mass politics concept in the light of some of our experiences.⁽¹⁾ This is particularly important in the context of the current Conference discussions. Talk of a 'middle way' between 'mass politics' and the Labour Party (as some documents have done) is quite wrong, and not only because they are falsely polarised. Defined in this way, the alternative can only be presented as clarifying ideas, consolidating organisation; in short re-arranging things for survival. Renewal and expansion of practice in any serious way is largely discounted.

CONCEPTS OF MASS POLITICS

The immediate problem is that despite its frequent use in BF (and elsewhere), there is no agreed definition of mass politics. There are two reasons for this. First, we are not the only ones to use it. Second, we have used it in different and sometimes contradictory ways ourselves. To illustrate the problem, take the following quote:

"By the mass party then we don't necessarily mean a huge party. Whilst we would no doubt increase Party membership several times over that still wouldn't make it that big. The mass party is 'mass' in the sense that it practices mass politics. The Party must recognise that just as a socialist society will be a pluralistic one, the movement that establishes must also be pluralistic. That means that the Labour Party should respect and seek to strengthen autonomous movements...rather than be seen as the fount of 'correct consciousness'...It must also be aware of the dangers of re-producing capitalist and patriarchal ideology within its own ranks and must therefore at all times extend a socialist culture within which activists can gain personal support and sustenance and also prove attractive to potential recruits".

('A Mass Party?' Nigel Stanley: Clause 4 Discussion Document)

The 'mass party' line argued by Stanley, Hain and the LCC clearly has a number of very similar themes to BF politics. Yet its origins and uses are partly specific to their experiences in the Labour Party. In that context the opposite pole is something like the Militant, who, believing that the LP already is the mass working class party, confine their activities to the narrow confines of the existing Labour Movement. Arguing for Labour to be a mass party therefore means policies like workplace branches, community organising and so on, which the LCC does. Yet this is only a specific component of what could be meant by mass politics and bears the imprint of the constraints of the Labour Party experience. I would like to suggest that there are three predominant strands of ideas and practice that co-exist in BF and the rest of the Left concerning mass politics.

1. Working class self-activity: It has always been the central tenet of revolutionary Marxism that the struggle for socialism was based on the self-activity of the working class. This referred both to the type of society socialism would be (self-management etc) and the means of achieving it (independence of the working class as a social force). Given that the activity of considerable numbers of socialists gradually lost this orientation (in favour of one towards leaderships and bureaucracies seen as representative of the working class) the emphasis of sections of the new left on self-activity was a form of mass politics. Although we have criticised the approach for not being 'mass' enough and for being restrictive in its range (eg over-emphasis on the shop stewards movement), there is no doubt that organisations like the SWP have contributed greatly to a re-emphasis on independent working class action and organisation. When BF has talked of 'mass work', basically we have meant self-activity in a general sense - organisation and politics built from bottom-up.

2. Autonomism: However, BF historically has never referred merely to the independence of working class action. The original guiding concept of working class autonomy was meant to indicate that if the working class was to assert its independent material needs it would need to break with the specific workings of the post-war capitalist system, based on the Keynesian use of state planning and wages policy. Hence the central perspectives of 'wages independent of productivity' and 'refusal of work': combined as 'more money less work'. This 'Italian' theory I take to be substantially discredited both as theory and practice. I do not intend repeating a critique made perfectly adequate elsewhere(I), merely to note its extremely negative consequence for the idea and practice of mass politics. This has two core aspects. First a great divide is drawn between terrains of activity transformed and used by post-war capital, notably the state and the unions. Second, the means to advancing socialism was seen unambiguously to exist in working class struggle as it existed on its own terrain - hence the famous 'communism is inherent in the struggles of the working class'. As a consequence this orientation led to a simultaneous over-estimation of the character of day-to-day struggles and under-valuing of the necessity to generalise action and demands and to transform them into programmes that could be implemented at the level of the unions, the state, or some other sphere of non-immediate struggle (eg workers' plans, social legislation). As Finn Macooln noted: "As a total distinction is drawn between the institutions of capitalist society and working class autonomy, then such moves are seen as forms of co-optation, of being taken in by the state". As such a concept of mass politics at best has some force only in periods of upturn and high struggle when it appears as if the working class has broken from Capital and all the workings of its 'co-optive instruments', it falls into confusion and disuse. Worse, it ceases to have a semblance of genuine mass politics, investing support instead in actions or organisations of an extreme minority character, unconnected to the real process of winning the hearts and minds of the mass of people for socialism.

3. Re-constructing socialism: It is this latter battle that I take to be the core component of mass politics. Most of the mistakes made by sections of the Left derive from the notion that socialist consciousness already exists in the working class and is awaiting the right leadership/programme (a concept shared by the orthodox Labour Left and orthodox Trotskyism); or such a consciousness is inherent in the class/struggle to be awakened by experience, propaganda or some equivalent of the princess kissing the frog. Activity under such conceptions is inevitably geared to circles already converted and active, so as to sharpen the ideas and strengthen the vehicle.

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See:

- P Anderson: 'The Crisis of the Revolutionary Left in Europe'; RS 5.
- F Macool: 'A Critical look at BF's theory'; DB April 1981.
- Mackenzie: 'Draft of article for Socialist Register on History and Politics of BF'.

This is not merely a comment on varieties of Leninism. It is perfectly expressed in a recent comment of Tony Benn: "The greatest problem we face is not that our policies are unpopular. The problem is that many people don't believe what we say and don't know whether we would do it if we were elected." (quoted Guardian 2-9-81). While there is an element of truth in the statement, the fact is that many people (and that includes working people) do know what we want to do and they don't like it at all. This is to do with the partial domination of bourgeois ideology - reproduced through the media, the experiences of so-called socialism in both Russia and the social democracies and the general way that people come to terms with living their lives in a capitalist society. Only the recognition that socialism is unpopular and the conscious property of a small minority of society guarantees a mass politics, if that lesson has been properly understood. That mass politics requires a 'long haul' at the level of ideology, culture, policy and organisation, a point I will return to later.

One obvious point that follows from the above different conceptions, is that tactics do not exist a priori to a concept of mass politics, they have to be worked out based on the theoretical content given to the idea. I now want to look briefly at some of the relationships between theory and practice.

MASS POLITICS IN PRACTICE

a. Big Flame: The practice that was partly based on the 'autonomy' component of mass politics, as stated earlier is dead and had never been replaced effectively. Let me give an example of that early practice from our activity at Fords Halewood. Some superb work was done in this area for many years, it was however flawed and ultimately collapsed. We deliberately advocated a policy of ignoring the union branch/es connected to the plant, except in specific occasions when workers could use them for their own ends. In addition we were cool or hostile to building a presence on the shop stewards' committee. On Merseyside generally the pattern was a similar story. Even at our height no attempt was ever made to make inroads into the Trades Council. The consequences were that we had no consistent practice in the traditional institutions of the labour movement that could have keyed into long-term organising, we recruited no activists among experienced militants that could have provided political stability and education to the organisation and specifically to the large number of working class militants of a 'raw' kind that passed through BF in the mid-seventies; and therefore the mass dimension to our activity increasingly rested on the external and often misleadingly optimistic activity of leafletting. When the leafletters got tired, got jobs, got hitched or moved elsewhere the practice was difficult to sustain both practically and in terms of political re-adjustment in the period of downturn. This is not to say that the autonomous mass politics practice had no connections with traditional working class institutions. But the over-riding idea of 'Working class use' of them proved an inadequate tactic for long term political work. It was as ultimately dismissive of them as the CP/Labour Left 'left government supported by extra-parliamentary mobilisations' is of the working class as a self-active force.

To say we have never replaced this form of activity is not meant to indicate that we have failed to do mass politics since. In fact we have done in a number of important ways. In united front and campaign work we have consistently emphasised going out to the broadest mass of people that is realistic (opposing 'labour movement only' perspectives). There have been a small number of collective base activities/interventions eg the Sheffield 'Council Worker' bulletin. Individual militants, supported sometimes by BF have struggled in their own sphere for a mass politics orientation in struggles, the most notable example being Jack Brown in Fords. Finally, we have propogandised for mass politics in our paper

and other publications. However their are important limits to what we have done, both political and organisational. If as Kimberly argues, we should 're-launch mass work' we would have two big problems. Firstly we no longer have any general political perspectives within which such an orientation would make sense to our members. With the demise of the autonomy theory, there is not even an inadequate strategy to guide the organisation. In practice even those who nominally support the old ideas around autonomy (and I am not here referring to the autonomous movements) are utterly half-hearted in their advocacy. Instead, and understandably in things like the Industry pamphlet, it has been replaced by the first component, of general working class self-activity and independent organisation. Secondly, we just don't have the numbers of militants, in or connected to BF to make mass work in any way effective.

b. The extra-parliamentary left: Of the rest of this section of the left, the SWP are by far the most significant organisers for a limited brand of mass politics - through the ANL, the RTWC and other initiatives. The orthodox Trotskyists tend to refer and use mass work as an occasional tactic when their burrowing in institutions is ineffective or recognised even by them as inadequate. The lony left (RCT/P etc) alienate even the most hard core leftists so I won't waste any words on them were mass politics is concerned. But to return to the SWP. A lot of what they do is good as far as it goes (some of it isn't eg in relation to feminism). However, it is not rooted in any long term strategy for winning a majority to socialism. What they have is their own variety of orthodox Leninism combining propaganda for socialism (fairly limited) with militant struggle (often effective). Any long term perspectives for creating and sustaining a socialist consciousness in the working class is contained only within the inferred militancy-crisis-collapse-party-power scenario handed down second-hand from I917.

c. The Labour Left: Events like the Unemployment demos, the Peoples' March, demos against the cuts like the 15,000 that marched in Lothian, show that the Labour Left can be a channel through which mass protest can co-alesce. But they have shown themselves unwilling or unable to create and sustain a popular mobilisation that can connect the battle for control of the LP, and for an alternative programme to everyday struggles and consciousness. Even in those cases where they realise that popular support needs mobilising they are largely wedded to the conception ~~xxx~~ and practice of representational politics, lacking the self-activity component of mass politics. There are fortunately sections of the new Labour Left, around Hain/the LCC, SERA etc that are struggling towards and for a mass politics perspective.

CONCLUSION

I am aware that the above discussion does not encompass the whole of the left or radical movements. There is a need for parallel examinations of the relation between feminism and other movements, and mass politics. However, I think some limited conclusions can be drawn. It is stupid to get trapped within the current practice of blaming every limit or defeat of struggle on a particular strategy or tactic of the Left. If we look at the struggle against the cuts for instance every tactic - mobilise for socialism on the rates, no cuts, no rates/rent rises, its not our problem/carry on struggling for what we want - has largely failed to mobilise the working class in large numbers and win. We are dealing with long term problems of creating a socialist politics in a conservative culture. To meet this challenge Big Flame needs to assess its theory and practice. The basics of my assessment would be twofold of this specific area (not referring to wider areas).

- i. Ditch the 'autonomy' component of mass politics, and work towards a strategy that combines the other two components. ~~xxx~~ The result would be the linkage of mass politics with a transitional politics that would have a dual emphasis on building independent working class activity and organisation, alongside the struggle for alternative socialist policies on the state terrain and turning the Labour Party outwards towards a mass, campaigning party.
- ii. Work towards the formation of a larger mass politics tendency, that would be based on alliances inside and outside the Labour Party.

I hope to work with other comrades on a longer strategy document that can take up these themes.

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