

What follows was written by a member of the Women's Commission for an introduction to a discussion at a BF women's week end. It was also written as a contribution to a pamphlet/book that the KB sisters are working on about women in left groups throughout Western Europe.

The History of the Women's movement within B.F.

Originally women in BF worked in base groups with men. The main base groups were centred on the car factories, for example Fords. In 1972 we were beginning to talk about our own politics and to be in separate groups working on issues more directly relevant to women. This coincided with women joining the organization who had been involved with the Women's Liberation Movement, The Claimants' Union* and other community struggles. This development also coincided with the rent strikes and the wave of community struggles round housing, maintenance, clean streets, safe play areas - all issues that women wanted to get involved with. For a while men and women worked separately and did not share their experiences. Women did not want to feel they had to answer to the men and to prove that what we were doing was equally valid.

Through the rent strikes women in BF got more of a sense of how Big Flame politics related to Feminism. BF politics embodied an understanding of the effect of Capitalism on personal life. It explained the effect that the creation of the Welfare State had on women's lives as women's traditional 'caring' roles were transferred to state institutions and given lower wages than men would accept. BF politics also stemmed from a different concept of leadership. We didn't automatically go to the shop stewards, union officials etc but looked to the people who were actually involved at a grass roots level, and listened to what they had to say and were prepared to learn from them.

Women who hadn't previously been involved in the Women's Liberation Mvt. got involved and started going to national conferences. We encouraged the working class women we knew (some of whom had joined) to go to the conferences and learnt a lot from their response. Through the rent strikes and the various community struggles two things became clear - Feminism isn't an outside issue unrelated to the working class and that women have to organize autonomously. It was becoming clearer through the practical problems of collective political action that women are subject to particular forms of exploitation and oppression precisely because they are women. We didn't use the word Patriarchy in those days but we asserted that women's autonomy was necessary for class struggle and that there would be no revolution without women's liberation and no women's liberation without a revolution. We also realized that the Women's Liberation Mvt from the working class women who wouldn't call themselves 'Feminists' but would organize together as women.

At this point BF women were actively involved in the National Women's Liberation conferences organizing workshops on Rent Strikes, Health and Big Flame politics generally.

Women were strong political force in the organization because the level of class struggle amongst women was high. Women in their communities throughout the country were fighting rent increases, fighting against gas and electricity cut offs, fighting for nurseries, safe play areas etc. And because of the sudden influx of Urban Aid many of these demands were met and there was a sense of if you fought hard enough then you could actually win a minor victory. It became necessary to these struggles themselves that we gave each other support with kids and house work as well as political support.

Women's autonomy was there in the beginning in practice and because women were strong and organized the theory was developed from that. In BF it has never been a question of battling against a traditional male-defined

politics but of battling to put a different sort of politics into practice within a mixed organization.

The Situation Now

The Women's Liberation Movement has not had a national conference for over three years. It is in the same sort of crisis as the far left - fragmented and demoralized. It is a situation in which it is easy for the divisions to be more important than they actually are. The present general political demoralization is inevitably reflected in the women in BF.

There has always been a Women's Commission, that meets on average every six weeks, and this is the place we have traditionally tried to develop women's politics and women's power within BF. When the decision was made at the national conference to have an elected National Committee the Women's Commission put forward the idea that the NC couldn't override decisions made by the Women's Commission. (The status of this idea is still a source of confusion.) It was decided that there had to be at least one third of the N.C. who were women in order for the NC to be constitutionally valid. We didn't see this as a solution to the problem of women's power within the organization because we don't believe political problems can be solved by organizational structures.

Few women at present seem willing to take on positions of leadership within the organization although women do take prominent roles within their local work - in National Abortion Campaign, Women's Aid, Ireland, and in campaigns around Health and Anti Racism work (just to mention a few).

It is not therefore a question of confidence but more of where women are prepared to put their energies in the present context of fragmentation. There is always a tension between being involved in a particular struggle and being involved in a political organization.

There was a time when we were prepared to be professional revolutionaries, when politics became one's whole life. Now many of us are older and have more demands from kids and work. We are now more desperate to keep our jobs and are not prepared to give up waged work for the odd year in order to service the revolution. There is just not the same sense of urgency compared to 1968 and the early 70's when we felt revolution was just around the corner. We are less evangelical about sacrificing our whole life to the cause and more aware of how people get involved in political action and what commitment means in a more realistic way. We have ceased to see ourselves as indispensable. Many of us are trying to work through those tensions in a way that achieves some sort of balance between being a frenetic 24 hour a day revolutionary and withdrawing into 'personal' solutions.

A man can be in a revolutionary organization and be married with kids and to a certain extent get away with the double life. For a woman in a revolutionary organization it is absolutely impossible in practice to separate politics from personal life.

In the women's commission we have not really tackled the problem of personal life. Our discussions centre on our political activity or else we talk about our relationship to the Socialist Feminist Groups, or Beyond the Fragments initiatives etc. We also discuss our participation in the general life of the organization including the NC, the other commissions, the newspaper and the other publications.

Private Life

The lack of discussion about 'private life' is most obvious to some of us

around the issues of marriage/ motherhood and the family. Individuals within the organization have made very specific choices on these issues since they have been part of BF and yet we never discuss collectively the issues involved.

At the Summer Schools issues related to childcare and the sexual division of labour are confronted in a very practical and usually constructive way. The commitment to overcome the problems is sincere but for many it involves changing one's behaviour for a week in the context of 'isn't collectivity fun.' Whereas for many in the organization childcare and housework are relentless demands that are often the source of deep and bitter conflicts.

BF Summer Schools have a good (and well deserved) reputation and are the time, above any other in the year, when discussions on personal life, sexual politics etc take place. There never seems the time or the inclination at other times of the year to take these discussions further.

Motherhood

The women, and men, with children have consistently made demands on the organization to provide good child care at meetings and conferences and to be aware of the problems of baby sitting when considering weekly branch meetings. In the whole the standard of the creches is high and the organization has responded well.

But several individuals (usually women) have had children and then withdrawn from the organization. Although they are often making a deliberate choice, the basis on which that choice is made has never been discussed collectively. Is it a question of lack of time that makes women drop out? Is it a question of the child's needs? Is it that the individual enjoys and wants to spend as much time as is possible with the child? Or is it that the organization doesn't really consider motherhood as an issue and so makes no time for these women's experiences to be incorporated into the general political life of the organization?

Equally unsatisfactory is the way women who have kids and do maintain a commitment to the organization are seen as somehow different or exceptional (or even misguided). This assumption misses the point because those women have specific ideas about their lives as women; about their role as mothers; about their kids needs and about how they organize their 'private' lives.

We obviously have disagreements about how we should be constantly available to our kids and how much time and space we should define for ourselves. We have disagreements about what constitutes stability and what constitutes adaptability and we have disagreements about the problems of the nuclear family, the problems of the collective and the problems of finding a compromise between the two. Regrettably these disagreements have never really surfaced in a constructive and open way. No one wants to be moralistic but it is important to locate on what basis choices are made and how consistent or otherwise are those choices with continued political involvement. Or do we need to redefine political activity and commitment in the light of parenthood?

I think we should take children a lot more seriously as interesting in their own right. We should spend a lot more time and energy on organizing specific kids events - trips to the seaside, parties, shows etc and not make some artificial distinction between this sort of thing and 'real politics'.

Sexuality

When we wrote Walking a Tightrope we realized how little discussion we have had on this subject. We felt it to be an enormous gap in our general political statement and we are committed to writing our next pamphlet on sexuality and the family.

In England it is the radical and revolutionary feminists who have the most to say publicly about these issues.

Amongst the women in BF at socials and at conferences there is a high degree of physical and emotional warmth such as it becomes irrelevant for many of us to label each other as heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual or celibate. We deliberately make time to meet as women at conferences, summer schools, socials or week ends away.

For the men in BF, I suspect the problem is greater and that gay men in the organization might find the dominant heterosexuality oppressive.

Our Relationship to the Women's Liberation Movement

We are part of the autonomous women's movement so it is a question rather of what our role within the movement is. Most women in BF are active within the Women's Liberation Movement where we have always tried to relate a class perspective to feminist principles and to broaden the definition of feminism to include the idea of a broad-based movement of women.

For many of us the women's movement still provides an emotional and political support that strengthens us in our struggle within BF to integrate Feminism and Socialism. At the same time most of us find it impossible to gain the political clarity and organizational coherence we need in our political work from such a broad based movement.

There are increasing conflicts between women in the movement. We disagree with those specific separatists whose primary analysis and focus for political action stems from an analysis of Patriarchy which they do not attempt to integrate with an analysis of Capitalism. I do not find it helpful to label these women as that often leads to the creation of unnecessary divisions, but I am increasingly aware of our differences in practice when the primacy of women's oppression and individual women's immediate emotional response is asserted over and above all other oppressions such as those of race, class or age.

In this context many of us feel an increasing sense of urgency in our struggle (and it is a struggle!) to integrate our understanding of Feminism and Socialism and to develop new forms of organizing that integrate the two. We argue within the women's Liberation movement for the integration of an analysis of Patriarchy and capitalism that sees both as equally important sources of oppression.

We remain and join BF not only because we believe in the need for political organization as such but also because there is still the space within the organization to develop our ideas and practice.

Glossary

Claimants Union - locally based organization of those claiming benefits from the State.

Urban Aid - Government money pumped into the inner city, awarded through local authorities but often administered by community groups.

FOOTNOTE

Some of the sub headings for this 'article' may seem rather arbitrary, but I stuck to the headings provided by KB because that was the easy way out!

S.C. Leeds - for the Women's Commission

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