

LETTER

Dear Big Flame,

I've been critically interested in your organisation on and off for 4 years and your summary 'towards a new etc.' got me finally to put pen to paper.

My doubts are about means, not your analysis of how it is. First trade unions. You are saying you're using union framework to go beyond its goals. Is it right your members aren't allowed to be shop-stewards?


And how does this connect? Second your reasons for building rank & file organisation. Are you saying there's no contradiction between leaders and ordinary members outside of reformism vs revolutionism.

This leads into Party and Class. You say the standard bit about working class self emancipation but then have a party growing out of the leading elements of the class. And I'm not sure what 'leading the proletariat to seize power' means completely. How's it different from taking power with the support of the class. You are aware how sterile leadership fetishes are. And maybe the problem is the abbreviating. But I'm sort of aware of new classes riding to power on the back of workers, and I'm not sure how you see that being avoided.

Cynically, ~~and~~ an ex-Big Flame member put your links with vanguards in eg Women's and Black movements down as an attempt to coopt them for building the Party - i.e. expanding Big Flame to become (yet another) revolutionary party.

Also I like your stress on it not just being factory workers, and your historical view of world revolution - as I understand you - is a relief after years of Trots et al saying 'if it doesn't happen everywhere at once it's no good'.

Less keen - to put it mildly! - about your support for the provos. Would like to hear your/someone's thoughts on this - any members living in East London? Have you still got a group at Ford Dagenham? Also would like a copy of the Manifesto, Women's struggle notes and Irish bulletin, for which enclosed 65p.

Fraternally 

ANSWER

Dear comrade,

apologies for the delay in answering your letter. Enclosed you will find a copy of the Manifesto, one of Women's Struggle Notes and one of the Irish Bulletin. Most of your questions are supposed to be dealt with in the Manifesto, but the points that you raise are so important and interesting that I'll try to answer.

First, trade unions. It is absolutely untrue that our members are not allowed to be shop-stewards. On the contrary several are and in any workplace situation where it's worth we encourage comrades to stand for steward elections. But it is true that our position on this is different from that of most organisations in the revolutionary left.

In our opinion the Trade Unions are the organisational expression of the reformist side of the working class, that inside capital and its development. Our main effort is that of helping the class to develop and organise its autonomous side, that against capital. If we start from this presupposition, which we can back at a historical level, at a theoretical level and in terms of analysing the present situation, it is clear then that we don't make a fetish of union structures and steward committees.

In other words our approach to the unions is a tactical one. For us there is no difference between shop-stewards and ordinary rank&file workers. Our political practice is directed to the mass of the people, to express and organise their needs, anger, struggles. On a lot of occasions the mass of the workers are held back in their development through lack of involvement and passive delegation to their stewards - and this is something we fight against.

If we think that in a certain workplace or union, the union structures can be used by the mass of the workers to advance their struggle, then we'll intervene in them. If the opposite is true, we'll think seriously about it. Because to us it's important that the struggle of the shop-floor reflects itself inside the union structures too, when these structures are totally discredited in the eyes of the workers, as sometimes happens in the most advanced plants in the car industry, it would be wrong to put emphasis on changing those structures. This can happen only at a later stage.

In most workplaces and industries ~~there~~ the situation described above does not apply, and there the union structures can be used advantageously. But precisely because we don't make a fetish out of union structures, our comrades, when standing for steward or union branch secretary, will always put forward an anticapitalist line. By which I mean that we don't try to get people to sneak into positions. But we try to win those position through advancing the struggles and consciousness of the masses.

I don't quite understand your second point, but let me say something about the building of autonomous mass organisms. We think that in situations of very advanced struggle and certainly in pre-revolutionary situations, the working class throw up organisations which in form and content go beyond and against trade unionism. The Soviets, the

Workers Councils, the Organs of Popular Power. Inside them the class start to organise their own power and eventually the seizure of power. In these situations the autonomous side of the working class manages to win over its reformist side.

This is not the case today in this country. But nevertheless, on some occasions, the class manages to express its autonomy, even if only for few days or hours. It's up to us, as revolutionaries, to see inside these sporadic experiences the embryos of the autonomous mass organism, and try to consolidate them, if the circumstances are favourable.

By putting emphasis on the necessity to build mass organisms, which we must understand today, even if it is not a task of this period, we want to restate that in order to seize power it will be the working class (in the broadest sense of the word) which will go through a process of building its own power, its own 'government', of tackling internal contradictions, on a mass level. That's where our theory of the relationship between class and party and our criticism of the so-called orthodox leninist position of the party starts. In other words, where other comrades talk simply in terms of trade unions (for the class) and party (for the vanguard), we talk in terms of unions, mass autonomous organisms and party.

This leads us to your third point. Honestly we share the same doubts that you have. The reality is that we think that 'the revolutionary party' will be necessary; but that the process of formation of it, which must start now, is very complicated and in some ways unpredictable. No revolution has yet won in advanced capitalism and as a consequence no satisfactory theory of the revolutionary party in advanced capitalism has yet emerged in a complete way, because that can happen only through the continuous presence and organisation of revolutionaries inside a revolutionary process.

That's ~~xxx~~ why we think that the most effective guarantee against the dangers that you point out, is that of fighting against these dangers in everyday's activity both inside our organisation and inside the struggle of the working class. Our modest contribution to the revolutionary process is that of organising now and trying to understand the conditions under which we organise, whom to organise with and how. This is also our contribution to the yet unresolved question of the revolutionary party.

Linked to this is our attitude to the Women's and Blacks movements. We recognise that there exists a contradiction between the autonomy of the womens' movement and the building of a mixed organisation. By trying to understand this contradiction and putting it at the centre of our debate and development, we try to tackle it. Not hoping that we can solve it now, but by making it into the motor of our development. Not only that. We also try to develop an organisation with a total perspective and therefore a feminist one. We all know the problems, the struggles, the personal changes which are needed in the process.

But we think that the relative power of women, the strength of the womens' movement, in this situation, make the effort not just necessary but also possible. It will be up to the women's movement ~~xxx~~ inside which the women in Big Flame are very active, to expel us if it thinks that our activity is manipulative and tending to get more members. Ultimately it will be up to the women in Big Flame to decide eventually that the contradiction autonomy of the movement/mixed

organisation is an antagonistic one and chose a separatist position.


In general we think we always put the movement first and the organisation second. If we fail to do that, we know that the movement will expel us, and we'll become yet another sect, which we don't want. It is because we want to fight against this danger that we are putting forward this project for a new organisation, inside which Big Flame is prepared to disband - all this is in the ~~Maxi~~ Draft Manifesto.

It's also in the light of this that we are working inside a Dagenham workers group, which is not Big Flame, and we have no intention whatsoever to take over. To us that group can represent ~~xxxxxxx~~ a much more advanced stage than Big Flame, and it is in the daily activity of that group that our 'good' intentions CAN be measured.

To finish this long ramble, I would like to stress that some of the points you've mentioned are the most difficult ones facing revolutionaries today. I've tried to answer by giving what I think is our position. But the debate is very open, the comments and criticisms always welcome. As both you and I know, the struggle is still a very long one, at every level. Letters like yours help us in the struggle and also to clarify our ideas.

Hoping to hear from you again.
Or maybe we can get in touch in East London.

Fraternally


for National Secretariat Big Flame.