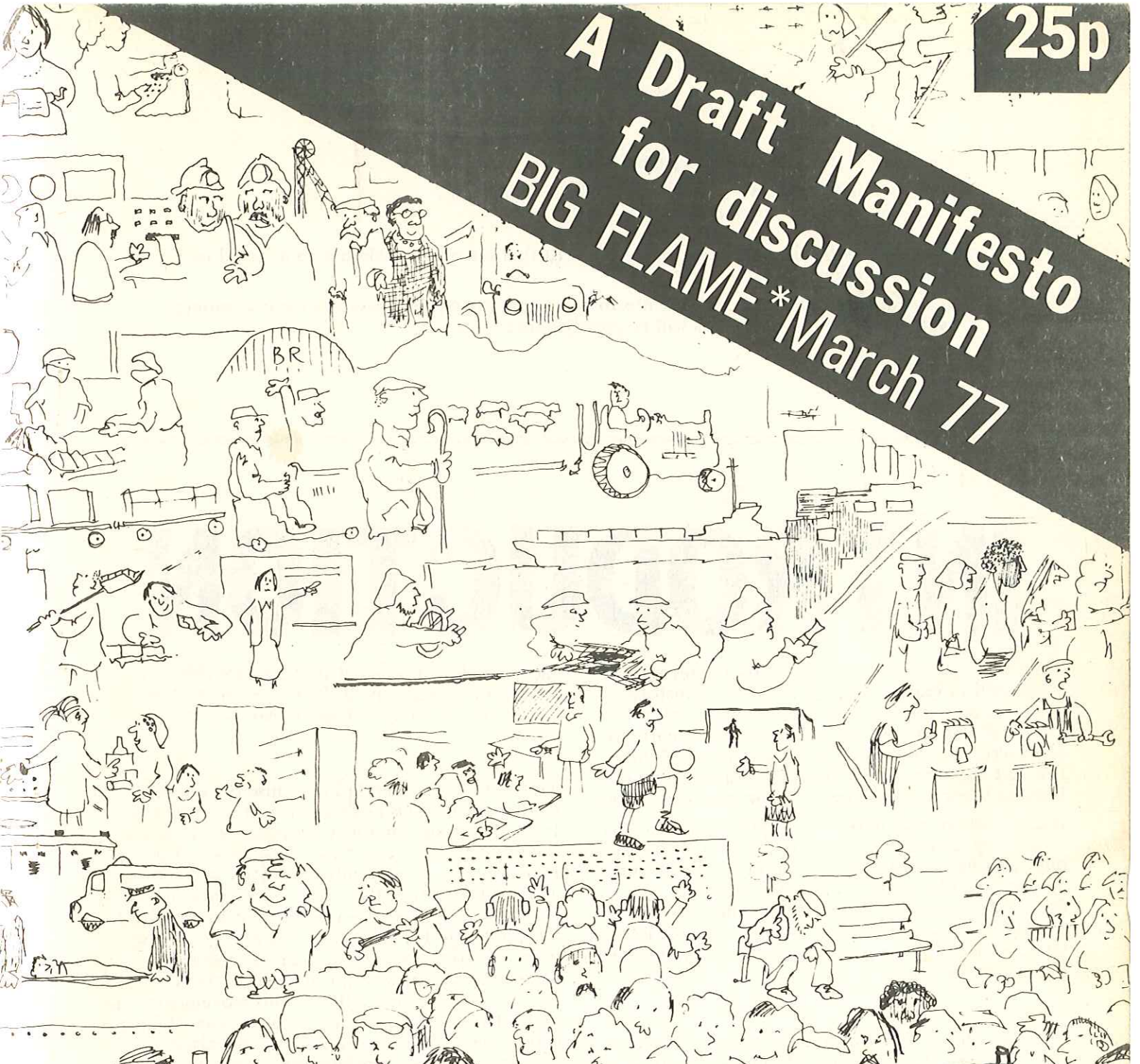


25p

A Draft Manifesto  
for discussion  
BIG FLAME\* March 77



**TOWARDS A NEW  
REVOLUTIONARY  
SOCIALIST  
ORGANISATION**

Copies of this manifesto are available from:

The National Secretary, 217 Wavertree Road, Liverpool 7  
Price 25p + 15p postage and packing.

All agreements, disagreements, requests for further information should be directed to the above address.

If the project outlined in this manifesto is to reach the widest possible audience, money will be needed. All donations will be greatly appreciated.

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# INTRODUCTION

This manifesto has been prepared by the revolutionary socialist organisation, Big Flame. Our history is brief. We emerged as a rank and file grouping in Liverpool in 1971, owing no allegiance to any particular ideological current or historical tradition. While this had the defect of forcing us to learn many practical and theoretical lessons from our mistakes; it has meant that we have defined our political task as that of developing a revolutionary politics for Britain today. This has meant that our ability to learn from and analyse the needs of modern conditions has been the touchstone of our politics and is the essence of this manifesto. Many other currents on the left still tend to impose politics developed from previous periods of history.

Our own ability to formulate a coherent political strategy was held back while we remained a local group. Since 1974, the setting up of Big Flame groups in other cities has partially enabled us to overcome that difficulty. Another help has been the inspiration of learning from revolutionary movements in the rest of the world – in our early years from Italy in particular, and more recently from Chile and Portugal.

The development of Big Flame has been consolidated by two national conferences. The first, in 1975, gave us an agreed minimum political basis and a national structure. Following from this came nationally-co-ordinated practices in industry, amongst women, in education, in hospitals, and in the Troops Out and anti-fascist movements, to name the main ones. The second conference, in November 1976, consolidated the political direction of the organisation in a National Committee and a Secretariat; voted on

more developed political strategies for different sectors of struggle and an overall political project for Big Flame, of which this manifesto is a part.

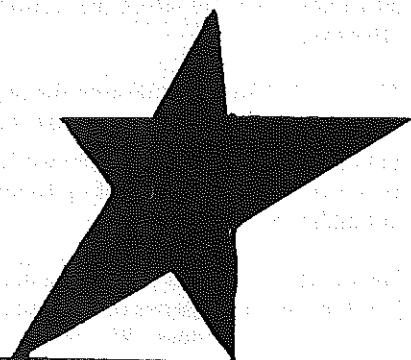
This history has been brief because the intended aim of this manifesto is not recruitment into Big Flame. It is a manifesto for a new organisation. This was the project decided on by our last conference. Big Flame has a distinct political identity and a growing and viable practice. But this does not guarantee that we are able to make the impact that it necessary for our politics in Britain today. For historical reasons we are relatively small and many who share our broad ideas and ways of working are fragmented into a number of local groups, autonomous movements, cultural activities and other left organisations. Pulling together these forces could significantly advance the class struggle. We therefore want to create, with others, a new organisation. This manifesto is a part of an investigation into whether this is possible.

Our reasons for this are outlined in the first section of this document. The manifesto has a more specific purpose. It is not the completed basis for an already formed organisation. It is a document to set in motion a process of discussion. The manifesto tries to put together many of the things we've learned. It also tries to clarify and systematise the ideas that have developed amongst sections of the socialist movement trying to break from certain traditional models of organisation and politics. But we are not arrogant enough to believe we know all the answers. This manifesto will no doubt be modified in discussion.

During the next three months we hope to organise such discussions with many groups on this document or anything else. If you would like a meeting, please contact us as quickly as possible.

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**outline of a proposal  
to revolutionaries and  
working class vanguards**



**TOWARDS A NEW  
REVOLUTIONARY  
SOCIALIST  
ORGANISATION**

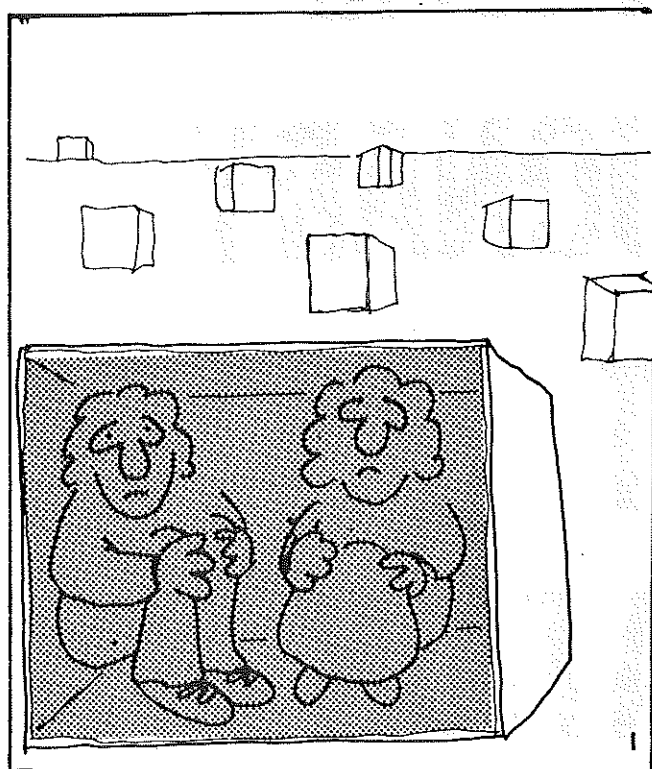
1. How do we assess the present political situation? What do we feel about it? What is the balance of class forces? Or, in other words — are we winning or losing? Are we getting nearer to communism or are we suffering a setback which is going to postpone hopes for decades? Never since the General Strike have these questions been so important in this country. Not only to revolutionaries, but to all working class men and women who daily are fighting hard for survival against the increasing ugliness of this society.

We characterise the present political phase as one in which the *balance of class forces* is in favour of the *bourgeoisie*. In our opinion this phase started with the referendum of June 1975. Despite the fact that at present we see for the first time the possibility of a fight back, we still think that overall the capitalist class is still on the offensive and the working class on the defensive.

In other words, we think that the referendum of 1975 started a period of retreat by the working class forces, which has not yet ended. The fact that now struggles are mounting again and the possibility of smashing the social contract shows us that this phase might be on the point of changing into a new phase, in which the working class will be on the offensive.

This also confirms that despite the brutal, total attack by the capitalist class against the material conditions and the organisation of the working class, the working class has not suffered a *historical defeat*, even if up to now it has not succeeded in building a total fight back.

We are not saying this because we believe that capitalism develops through a series of conspiratorial decisions and plots (although often it does). We are just restating that capitalism, under the blows of a strong working class offensive, has to fight hard for its survival. In order to do that it has to employ the best strategy and tactics — which at the moment for capitalism can be implemented only by the traditional institutions of social democracy — the Labour Party and the trade union apparatus.



2. In *Big Flame*, over the years, we have repeatedly emphasised the role of the rapid growth of working class struggle in this country in the 1960s and early 1970s as one of the principal reasons for the deep crisis of capitalism in Britain. We can point to the explosive struggles over wages, the freeing of the Pentonville Five, the smashing of the Industrial Relations Act, the fight against the capitalist organisation of production, especially on the assembly lines as evidence of this. Also the refusal of productivity, notably in the mines; the emergence of egalitarian demands (eg. equal pay and the miners' demand for a national bonus). The spreading of tactics: sit-ins, flying pickets. The emergence of struggles of appropriation — squatting, rent strikes etc. The emergence of demands for a guaranteed income (eg. lay-off pay). The growth of the women's movement, and its increasing part in the movement of working class women (equal pay, the right to choose).

This list is long and it could be much longer. It illustrates one side of the working class — its strength and combativity, its ability to mount autonomous struggles, that is struggles in which there is a separation between the needs of capitalist development and the needs of the working class.

However, throughout this period the working class remained dominated by reformist organisations, the Labour Party and particularly the trade union apparatuses. We think that what happened — and continues to happen — is that working class organising and consciousness remain trapped within what seemed appropriate in the period of reforms and expansion that dominated the post-war period.

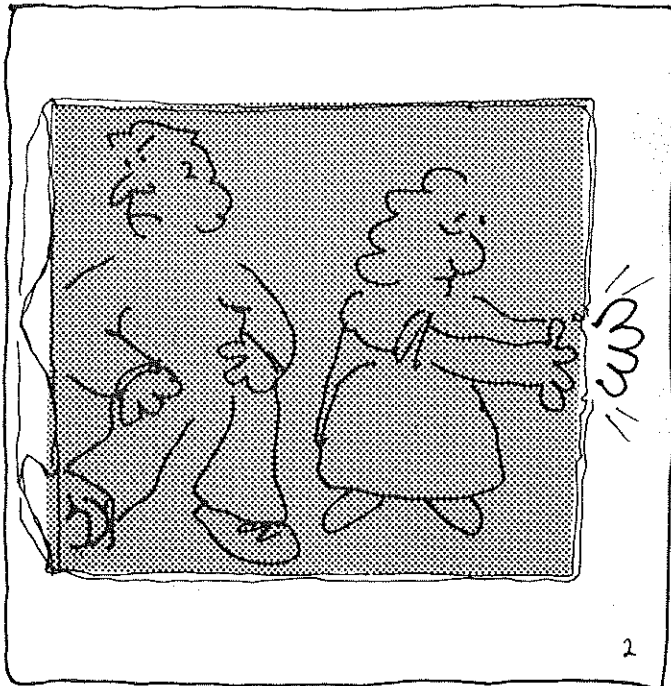
In this period it was possible to fight and win by delegated struggles on a local and sectional base. This tended to confirm the working class within a consciousness that was aware of class divisions but inward-looking, not dealing with society as a whole. The fact that there were many strong and combative struggles in many sectors did not mean that this consciousness and forms of organisation were capable of coping with the *different demands of a crisis and recession*.

And this undoubtedly remains the single most important weakness of the working class in this country. But today the situation is changing. Social democracy can give very little to the working class. So while it maintains power over the working class, its ideology and institutions find it increasingly difficult to maintain their domination over the working class. The huge unemployment, inflation, the cuts in public spending, the increasing integration of the unions into the state; all these have contributed to a serious weakening of labourism's ability to hegemonise the working class.

3. In the last few months the situation seems to have improved again. Very hard and politically advanced struggles have been fought in many sectors. Some of them have brought about a much needed feeling of enthusiasm.

Last Autumn saw the victory of the Trico women in their equal pay strike. The huge demonstration against the cuts, mainly of public sector workers. The fights against lay-offs and increased productivity in the car industry.

The months of January and February have seen a long list of struggles take place. We'll mention just a few which have been significant for their content and forms of organisation. The Massey Ferguson occupation and then strike in Coventry against increased productivity. With weekly mass meetings of around 1,000 workers (out of 1,200); with stewards meetings open to all workers; with leafletting organised for the wives; the Massey Ferguson workers have become a real reference point, particularly for the British Leyland workers during their strike or lay-off. The Wildt Mellor textile machinery factory occupation in Leicester against a 50% cut in the workforce. The work-in at the Kirkby plant of Plessey, against closure. The occupation of the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Hospital in London against closure. The demonstration of hospital workers of Ealing, Hounslow and Hammersmith who locked the Area Health Authority in the Town Hall and forced them to listen for a change. The long strike which ended in partial victory at Balfour Darwin, Sheffield. The occupations of polytechnics and universities. The list could be very much longer.



On top of this we have witnessed the beginning of the battle to smash the Social Contract. Especially centred in the car industry – with the BLMC toolmakers strike, motions, resolutions and meetings from all sides – this battle has the potential to unify the working class over the issue of wages, ie. against the attack on our living standards. Coupled to this, one sense that a lot of people are ready to have a go – especially in a situation which is so unstable.

On the other hand we still witness the isolation of some of these struggles, or their inability to break through the general framework outlined earlier. Like at Trico, where the feminist contents of the strike have been 'played down by the leadership ever since. Or like the fight against the Social Contract, which seems to be channelled into the traps of demands for increased differentials or 'free collective bargaining'.

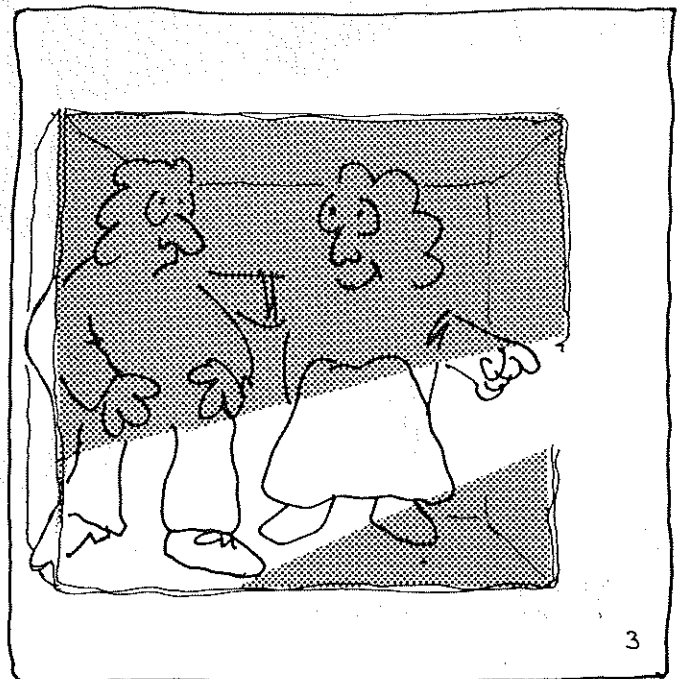
All these struggles are breaking the period of social peace, but are still incapable of generating a feeling of unity and power throughout the working class. This is the direction in which we have to work. If we are successful, then very soon we might witness the beginning of a new explosive phase of class struggle.

4. In the meantime, for the majority of the working class the problem of survival becomes harder and harder. The capitalist offensive is brutal – not in the sense of mass repression, torture, assassination etc. – but in terms of the effects it has on our lives

When we live on a housing estate and have massive rent arrears, can't cope with gas or electricity bills, can't go for a drink, feel totally isolated, in a ghetto, no money for the bus fare into town.

When we work on an assembly line, 8 hours a day, and we see the bosses trying to take away what we have won over the years by increasing productivity, reducing manning levels, increasing discipline.

When we are housewives, stuck in the home, trying to make ends meet, having to work harder because they've closed the local hospital, or there is no place in the nursery, or a 1001 other cuts in social services.



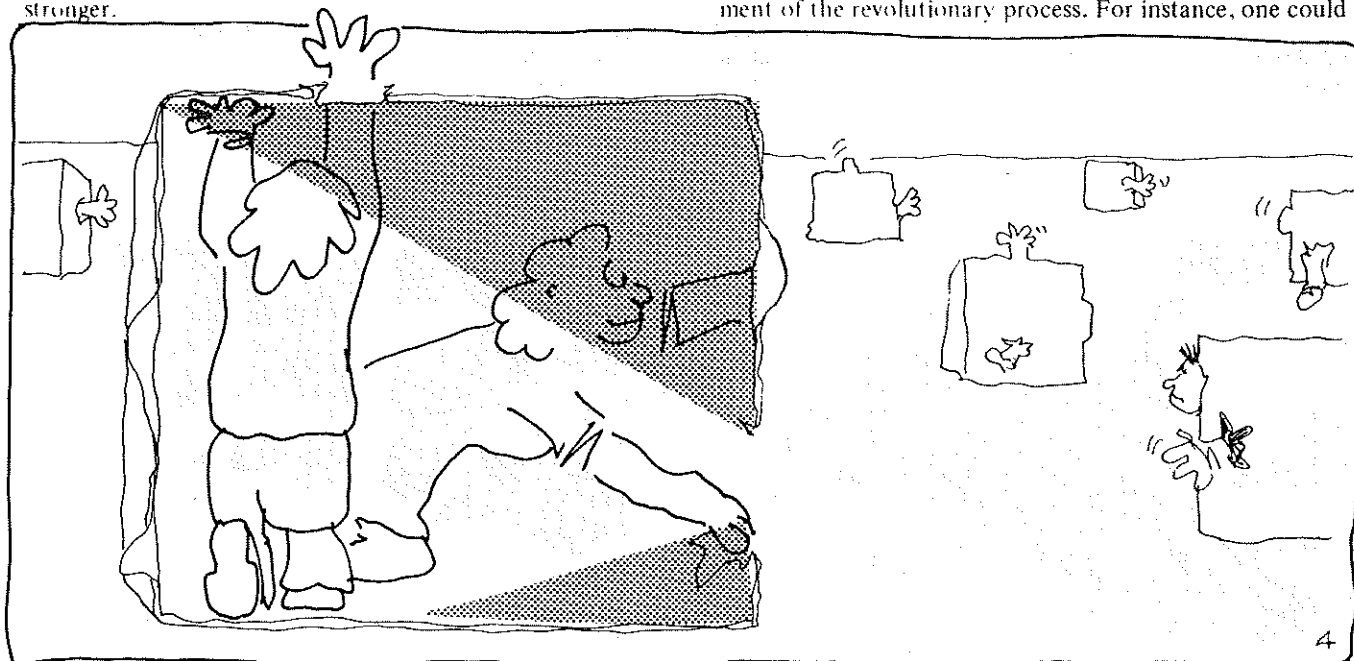
When we've just been made redundant, or been on the dole for years, and we know that there are no jobs – suddenly we feel that you've got a new label on our – 'unemployable'.

Then we know what the word brutal means. It means unemployment and inflation. The need to work overtime. The impossibility of enjoying a social life.

These are the effects of the crisis on our living standards, on our material conditions. It's all very well to say that the crisis of capitalism is unavoidable and that we, as revolutionaries, should welcome it and speed it up. This is true in a sense. But people want victories, solutions, power, sometimes ways-out. These can't be left to a future society that nobody knows when we'll be able to build. People ask themselves – 'Is it worth the fight?' And the next bill comes, and powerlessness increases.

5. The brutality of the effects of the crisis on the working class is not just on their material conditions — it is on their ideas as well. And we all know how clever the ruling class is at this game. The blackmail of the 'national interest', the revival of the war spirit, the hullabaloo over the Queen's jubilee. More important — the campaign against 'the scroungers' — a device to try to divide those with a job from the unemployed.

More frightening — the upsurge of fascism and racism. Easy solutions — apparently full of common sense: 'I know the solution to unemployment — Kick the blacks out'. The National Front is gaining a lot of members and influence. It is no coincidence that this is happening now, rather than, say, 1972 or 1974, when the working class was more united and stronger.



6. At a personal level we are all hit in every way. Our personal relationships are under stress, always constrained by the problems of survival. Tired, frustrated, worried. Looking for an escape, rather than collectively trying to tackle the problems with creativity and energy. Desperately holding on to the old, rather than accepting the challenge of looking for the new. And even losing the old.

How many working class families are splitting up? Countless. Not that we want to defend the family as an institution — on the contrary. But we want to be able to make choices, not to be compelled by the stresses created by capitalism to destroy that little bit of security, love and affection which we thought we had.

7. Does this sound tragic? No, it shouldn't. That's how people feel. It's on an understanding of this, on the anger that it creates, that we can and must build.

By stating all this, we want to fight two of the theories of the development of the revolutionary process which exist inside the working class. The first says that the inevitable collapse

of the capitalist economy necessarily leads to a pre-revolutionary situation, regardless of the balance of forces among the classes. According to this view, the task of the vanguard is to keep itself together in 'revolutionary party', which, when the crisis is deep enough, will lead the masses to seize power.

This view is wrong on two counts. In advanced capitalism the crisis does not come as a sudden collapse, but as a protracted phenomenon. Within it, it is the working class, with its struggles, that can lead the crisis to a point of no return, not the other way round. It's no coincidence that all the attempts by the capitalists to survive take the form of direct attacks on the working class.

So the existence of the crisis does not guarantee the advancement of the revolutionary process. For instance, one could

say that the political situation in this country is very unstable. The economic strategy of the ruling class can be seen to be failing. The Labour Government, which has provided the best possible framework for ruling class policies, is under heavy attack from the Tories, Scottish Nationalists etc. and would stand no chance of being returned at another election.

The instability of the political situation is always a good ground for revolutionaries to operate in; but does not necessarily imply an advancement in their politics. As recent by-elections have shown, large sectors of the working class, without a clear alternative and in a situation of relative powerlessness, have tended to react against Labour's policies either through passive abstention or voting to the right or the fascists.

The vital issue which is misunderstood by these comrades, putting forward this theory, is that in the struggle for communism, the working class fights not only against the class enemy, but also against itself. The new men and women have to start to be born today. The contradictions within the working class have to be worked on now, not allowed to sharpen, and eventually left till after the seizure of power. Because, besides anything else, without a unified working class there is no possibility of seizing power.

The second theory is that held by so many disillusioned working class militants who say: 'Wait till people are starving, no pint, no ciggies — then they will rise.'

Although it's true that the more the working class threatens the survival of capitalism, the more capitalism will try to make its life miserable in every sense; it certainly doesn't follow that when everyone is starving, then they'll rise.

The question is a different one — it is at the level of *power*. If the capitalist offensive manages to win, to start making the working class feel powerless, if we start taking their attacks for granted, if they manage to split us up and actually make us fight it out amongst ourselves for survival. Then, no matter how starving we are, for a long time the working class will submit to the status quo. That's why our starting point is always the struggle of the working class, because this struggle often shows a clear anti-capitalist content. It is through such struggles, and the intervention of revolutionaries in them, that the power of the working class is built — the consciousness of being a class, the most important class in society. Without this power, every possibility of advancing towards communism is non-existent.

9. The unity of working class people, of various sectors — the confidence of fighting for the same goals — this is what we must fight for. It is that unity which is going to make people strong and full of support in their attempt to fight the crisis — the stimulus to continue, rather than passively give up.

Because to all of us, individually and collectively, it makes a big difference to feel part of a movement which is accomplishing that unity. If threatened with eviction, or the sack, or to be without money for food, it makes a difference if we see a march of workers and tenants, women and men, blacks and whites, going by the house, chanting slogans against inflation and unemployment, waving banners and making you feel you are not alone.

You will still be confronted with your bill for rent or food, but you'll feel part of something which is going to change it



8. When we assess a situation we always look at three aspects, all interrelated. *The radicality of the clash, the degree of crumbling of the bourgeois institutions and the level of unification of the working class.*

Whereas in other countries as well as Britain, the third aspect has more or less followed the other two as a consequence of them, we argue that this is not the case today. In fact we say that the struggle can be further radicalised and the bourgeois institutions further hit, only by starting from a newly acquired level of unity among the working class forces. A total political offensive by capital can only be effectively met by a total, general and unified response. Today this question takes an unprecedented priority.

all. You'll feel enthusiastic. You'll feel powerful. You'll know that if the bailiff comes, all those people, your neighbours and workmates, will be prepared to defend and protect you.

The process of building the unity of all working class sectors and the system of alliances that can be formed with other strata, starting from the needs of the working class, is what has been called popular power — the growing capability of the working class to impose its viewpoint on every aspect of society. The growing confidence in defeating the old and building the new. The capability to express, through struggle, unity and discussion, those demands, perspectives and strategies which go totally beyond the boundaries of reformism.

The attempt to tackle all the contradictions which exist among us. The progressive elimination of bourgeois thinking and ways of behaving. The challenge posed to the capitalist ruling institutions.

10. We don't advocate the setting up of institutions of popular power as a realistic perspective for the situation in Britain today. Popular power is not just the product of the aspirations, hopes and work of revolutionaries. It develops only when conditions are ripe. But it is up to us, as from now, to fight for the politics of popular power. To build towards it. To understand and generalise the embryos of popular power which exist in the struggles of today. To reject any attempt to dilute the historical message of revolutionaries, and instead to reaffirm the primacy and the necessity of a total revolutionary perspective.

When people fiddle the meter or pay the wrong fare, when workers manage to sneak out of the factory 5 minutes early, or to the pub at dinner hour, when housewives shoplift, they are all engaged in struggles for survival. But these struggles, even if massively widespread, are still *individual*. When the electricity board comes around to put a new seal on, or you are caught shoplifting, or getting out of the factory early, this form of individual action becomes totally ineffective.

Which is not the case if you organise a mass struggle for the reduction of electricity prices, or a collective non-payment of fares, or you take time off the boss by going slow. These are examples of *collective actions*. In these situations you are powerful, because you are part of a struggle which directly involves hundreds, maybe thousands.

Our task today, more than ever, is that of finding in the individual struggles for survival or the isolated fights taking place, the *seeds of communism* and transforming them into a collective struggle for communism.

11. These last few points lead us inevitably to the question of the *revolutionary party*. Unification of the working class, working class power and revolutionary organisation are interconnected questions. We've already explained why we reject a concept of the party based on ideological continuity. We've also explained why we believe in the necessity of revolutionary vanguard organisation — and eventually the revolutionary party, the party which will lead the working class to the seizure of power. All very well.

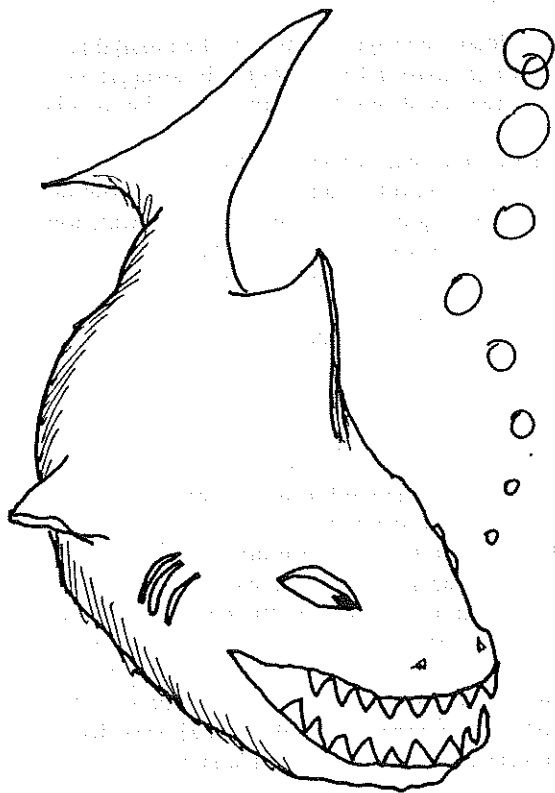
But the question remains: how do revolutionaries help the strengthening and unification of the working class? How do we help the building of the revolutionary party in this situation? In other words — it is in this situation that we must make our contribution to the practical and theoretical development of the revolutionary party. Otherwise, if we are just interested in principles, or dogmatically apply models of the past, or prepare ourselves only for a distant future, we will end up building a small sect, which will simply preserve its own purity. We are not interested in that.

In every phase of class struggle we must define the conditions under which revolutionary organisation is built, who will build it and how to do so. Only this will help towards the redefinition of the revolutionary party in advanced capitalism — a problem still unresolved today.

12. Various tendencies exist within the working class movement. Some are reformist, others revolutionary. Some are better defined, some less. Some are organisationally consolidated, others aren't. We believe that the revolutionary party will be born out of a long, non-linear process of *struggle, co-operation, confrontation and fusions* among these tendencies — and this will happen in the heart of class struggle.







This is what distinguishes us from other revolutionary organisations – we do not consider ourselves the sole depository of revolutionary truth. We think that we represent an important tendency and fight for our politics.

This is not sufficient to justify our existence. If or when we felt that our existence as a revolutionary organisation added nothing to the development of the power of the working class and the revolutionary party, then we'd be ready to disband ourselves.

It is necessary to define exactly what are the revolutionary tendencies within the working class. To define their politics. To examine their power. To make sure that no comrade is lost to the cause.

13. Other revolutionary organisations must feel the same need. They have proposed changes, even if for slightly different purposes. Whether it is the move from I.S. to the Socialist Workers Party, or the International Marxist Group's attempt to regroup the Trotskyist left – most organisations seem concerned with the lack of power they have in society, their incapability to further the power of the working class.

At the same time, we all agree that the situation is full of potential. The situation is unstable, more people are ready to approach revolutionary politics, there is a general need for a total alternative and a sharpening of class polarisation.

That's why the situation presents us with urgent tasks. Either we build now something valuable and powerful for working class people, or our influence within the class will diminish while the power of reformism will grow again, and the reaction against it will be mainly in the wrong direction.

14. We in Big Flame are going through a crisis in this period. As with the rest of the left, this is a positive crisis, in the sense that it is a product of a better understanding of society and a higher consciousness of the hard task before us. This crisis is at two levels.

The first one is the level of individual comrades. Most comrades with a student or intellectual background have come out of the wave of struggles of the late 1960s – from the women's movement, the claimants movement etc. Most of the working class comrades have become involved and then conscious during the great wave of struggles which in the end brought down the Tories and then forced Labour on to the defensive for at least a year.

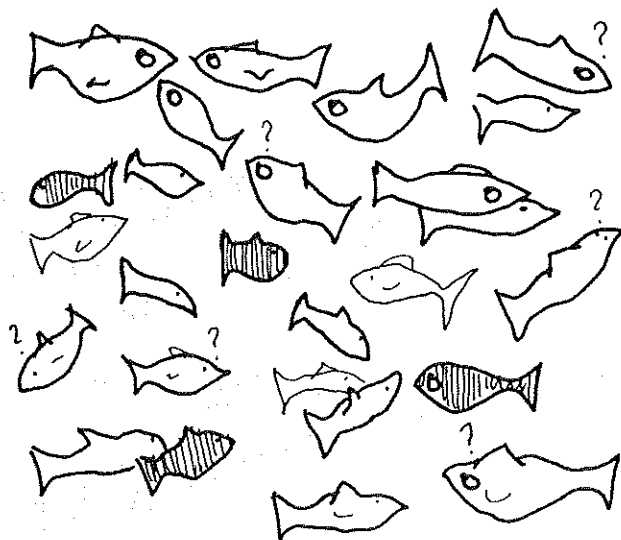
In a changed situation, the problems, difficulties, and doubts facing every working class person, are doubly present in the lives of committed revolutionaries. The need to see some 'reward' for our patient work. The need to feel enthusiastic about the future as we sometimes feel nostalgic about the past.

The second level is that of organisation. Although growing in numbers and importance, Big Flame is still too small and too little important in relation to the needs of the struggle. When, in another phase of class struggle, we saw our role as simply that of stimulating the full expression of working class autonomy, our numbers and overall influence at a general, national level, were of little importance.

But today, in this situation, it's not sufficient to have a good base in one or two factories or communities. People ask for *total* alternatives. If you are not capable of giving this to people, you are bound to lose a lot of them, not only to the organisation, but to the revolution. A national presence, numbers and a working class composition are now more important than ever.

How many times have we heard comrades tell us – 'I agree with your ideas, but what can you do about them?' Or 'I agree with 99% of your political line, but I have doubts that BF will manage to become a strong enough organisation'.

We in Big Flame have had similar doubts, and that's why we are trying to work towards the solution of their problem. It is our priority to investigate the possibility of developing a new revolutionary socialist organisation.



15. We mentioned before that other organisations are going through changes. We are talking mainly about the I.M.G. and I.S. (now SWP). We view these changes with interest, but there are some fundamental differences in the conception of building political organisation that prevent us for the time being from considering the possibility of fusion, joining or regrouping with either of them.

We criticise the SWP for its *quantitative* concept of building the party and its way of seeing the movement only as an appendix of the party. In this sense we criticise their involvement with the black movement – particularly as it manifested itself in the Summer of 1976 – which was correct from the point of view of *content and political line*, but was seen by the majority of blacks as *manipulative*. The main concern of the SWP appeared to attempt to recruit into the ranks of the party. The same could be said of the SWP's involvement in the National Abortion Campaign. We reject the idea that the task in every situation is always that of building the party, i.e. recruiting, recruiting, recruiting.

One affect of this mistaken idea is the lack of internal democracy within the SWP and its sectarianism, shown by its unwillingness to co-operate with the rest of the left at any but the most minimal level. Again this shows an incorrect attitude towards the mass movement and almost total disregard for other revolutionary tendencies, even if they are weaker.

We counterpose this with just one sentence. For us the movement comes first, the party second.

We also criticise the IMG's proposal for a regroupment. Even if we are not among the people they would like to regroup with (the Trotskyist left), we must say something about this. Firstly, we have already mentioned our disagreement with the concept of the party as being posed in terms of ideological continuity (Trotskyism in their case). Secondly, we think that a regroupment among revolutionary forces is valid only if it is fought for, debated and decided inside the masses and their struggles. In other words if it adds to the organisation and strength of the class. Otherwise it can be a dangerous exercise, where differences are simply forgotten, only to re-emerge after a few months and produce a new split. That's why what we are proposing is not a regroupment of vanguard organisations within the revolutionary left.

Despite these disagreements, we'll always work for unity, joint initiatives, front activities, joint debates among revolutionaries, wherever and whenever it is valuable for the advancement of the class struggle.

16. What we propose instead is the possibility of forming a new organisation forged inside the struggle and the experiences of vanguard elements of the working class.

More important, we want to fight for the development of a movement in this country based on the politics of popular power interpreted according to the present situation:—

- a) Mass involvement of all. Mass control of the struggles.
- b) Unity amongst and involvement of all sectors of the working class.
- c) Clear anti-capitalist and anti-reformist content.

We see the potential for this movement to emerge, for a new phase of class struggle to start. But we've got to work for it. Inside it, we see the possibility for a lot of leading working class militants, non-aligned revolutionaries, disillusioned socialist militants, activists in the feminist and youth movements to join forces in a more formal way in a new organisation.

Big Flame wants to be a part of this process, but not to control or manipulate it. We have already decided that if this project were successful, Big Flame would disband.

The first part of our investigation into the possibilities for such a new organisation has been encouraging. We've come into contact with hundreds of people who, on their own or in groups, share similar feelings, ideas and practice. We've participated in joint initiatives, some short term, some long term.

A lot of the comrades we've come into contact with will not join, or help to create a new communist organisation as yet – they will be working with us. A lot will. But all of us share the basic will to reaffirm the primacy of revolutionary politics: All of us want to liberate politics both from its reformist meaning and context and from the often narrow debate about political line. And we want the working class to attempt to collectively solve its problems in the struggle for communism. We think that never before has the task been so urgent – and it corresponds to the needs of the majority.

This manifesto starts for us the second part of our project towards building such a new organisation. We hope it will be useful to continue the debate, to sharpen our practice, to clarify doubts. It represents a first attempt to draw up a series of points about political line. We invite all comrades to express criticisms, comments, agreements and disagreements.

