

This is a personal view about where we should be going and what we ought to do about Socialist Unity. It begins with an assessment of what has happened to us over the last couple of years. It ends with some proposals about what we should do over the next year or so.

1975-77

Revolutionaries exist for the class struggle; when it's going badly, they become accident prone. One of our greatest mistakes in the last couple of years has been to expect too much from organisational solutions. How has this happened?

Partly influenced by what happened in Italy after 1969, there was for a long time in BF the idea that a great upsurge of mass struggle would convert us into part of a mighty revolutionary organisation. The mighty organisation was not to be one of which we were a part, alas, but a not very big and very sectarian group, IS/SWP. Indeed the upsurge was smaller in Britain than in most of Europe and its political impact far less profound.

Much of the ground won in the period up to the mid-70's was quickly recovered in the political/economic offensive launched by the ruling class after the 'Yes' victory in the 1975 Common Market referendum. That offensive has transformed industries (cars, docks), hit at political rights (PTA) and brought into question the growing power of women (Benyon). Revolutionaries discovered how weak was their base in the working class and how badly prepared the class was to stand such an offensive. All this was taking place, of course, against the background of a world capitalist recession and a crisis of inflation, unemployment and sterling collapse in Britain.

Big Flame put forward a Project to create a new revolutionary organisation in autumn 1976 as one way out of this situation. In a nutshell, the idea was to bring together under one banner all the political forces which shared our politics. There was no expectation of something vast growing out of the attempt, but at least our tendency would emerge stronger and more capable of dealing with the situation.

The results of the Project are not what we expected, partly because the political situation has tended to deteriorate (until very recently), and partly because we couldn't predict the Project's impact on other political forces.

The first thing we haven't done is to launch any new organisation. In fact, a priority now is to organise a working meeting of the people who attended the BF recall conference last summer to decide how to take this part of the Project forward. There are plenty of signs to suggest that interest in the Project has continued to grow and that, moreover, there are several areas where we are on the verge of witnessing the formation of new groups, either of Big Flame or independent but sympathetic.

We haven't given much attention to joint intervention initiatives so far. In fact, we haven't given much time to establishing a working class base for the Project. There are some areas of work where we should get on with this. The national car workers conference will mean a good start but this is the bare minimum. What else are we to tackle?

One answer could be Socialist Unity. Let's look at the way SU has arisen for us before we deal with the right attitude to adopt towards it.

SU is one of the unpredicted fruits of the Project. In the past our fame has been built above all on our car work and our work in TOM. We were never taken seriously by other left groups, partly because we were small but mainly because we were written off as a locally based organisation without clear politics. This is not completely untrue. But all this changed with the Project. We produced a Manifesto which caught people's attention. We brought out the Trotsky and Education pamphlets. And we decided to support the IMG's campaign in the Stechford by-election. Suddenly we were being invited to speak at IMG meetings and later at rallies to launch Socialist Challenge.

What was positive about this was

- a) we realised that despite our size we could still have an influence on the development of the left.
- b) we were compelled to recognise that BF had to have a clear position on national issues and be ready to participate in or lead national initiatives.

Good. The problem was the confusion all these developments were creating within Big Flame. First, comrades wanted to know why the Project hadn't changed their work in the slightest. Why more and more of our energies were directed away from local, mass intervention and towards the distinctly organisational activities associated with the Project and its spin-offs. And as the summer wore on, many began to wonder if BF wasn't being led blindfold into an alliance, and maybe later a fusion, with IMG. This was especially disconcerting for the comrades of the RMC who were debating a fusion with us after a bitter parting from the Fourth International a few years previously.

What had really happened was that we had swapped the miracle solution of the mass upsurge for the new miracle solutions of Projects and even Socialist Unity. The fact of the matter is that there are no easy, quick and lasting solutions to the building of working class power or a mass revolutionary organisation in Britain. The pace of our revolution is not that of Italy or even France. We have to adjust to a different time scale and a different approach than in these other countries.

So where are we now?

There are many signs that the political situation is beginning to improve now. The pay policy will probably hold, but the challenge on the wages front to the Government and the TUC is growing. Calls for mass action receive a better response, providing the political issue is clear and the possibilities for victory are encouraging; this has been the case with the early summer mass pickets of Grunwick and the growing mobilisations against the fascists. Most of us can sense a growing pressure on our organisation to return to intervention. In some areas and sectors, the possibilities for joint work with other forces are good.

But what way do we approach Socialist Unity? I think it would be a mistake to give it number one priority. For many reasons.

Here are some -

- a) Let's take a flexible approach to SU. Where it makes sense to build it, build it. In practice that's likely to mean building it where there's an election campaign. There may be places too where something like SU could be built to

deal with special situations eg Grunwick support committees or anti-fascist committees could bring together some of the same people that SU might attract and, perhaps, set up some more permanent structure as well. But having said this, it would be stupid to try to create a national chain of SU groups unless there is a sense in the class vanguard that this would be useful and worth supporting.

- b) The prospects for SU aren't bad in some areas (above all where there is a sizeable Asian population responding to the strong anti-fascist line of SU) but it would be bad news to find ourselves supporting another half-dead front at the expense of other more important work. A single minded devotion to campaigns and front is fine for IMG - they're there to cream off the militants for themselves - but we have to remember that our tradition and strength is based on a live, direct contact with the mass es. (Besides, if you're looking for models, the SWP has a lot to teach anyone about mass work , even if we don't agree with the direction they give it.)
- c) We need to be cautious about working with IMG in SU. I'M not raising doubts about their trustworthiness . The problem is that they do have set ways of working and if they dominated SU branches, it is questionable how long most independents would be able to stay inside SU. We may not be the the world's most proletarian organisation, but neither does the IMG have the Midas touch with the working class.
- d) There is another consideration. We should be thinking about how we use our influence to build the mass politics tendency. How do we win support for the idea of mass intervention work and all that goes with it? In every situation where we are active, we should be thinking of ways of doing this. Potentially, we can win militants in struggle as well as members of groups like IMG. After all, the left is in crisis and we do have a tried and tested strength.

So, what's the alternative to Socialist Unity?

Where we can, we should build SU. But that's not the only national priority for us. Our first priority nationally is to build our industrial work. This has always been a weak point and it has always made it difficult for us to attract working class members and leaders. This isn't to say that our work with students or among women is brilliant but on the strength of recruitment, there's no doubt where we do best.

Second, we have to resolve the question of the new revolutionary organisation by bringing together the Project's supporters and deciding whether to form a new organisation. That will act as a much needed political boost.

Third, we have to try to apply the recall Conference decisions on priorities in our political work. (A list of conference decisions will soon be published.)

All this gives us the framework for activity for the coming year. It would be misleading to claim that this will overcome all our problems. Nothing ever does that. But it should restore our confidence in ourselves and put us in a stronger position from which to influence the development of the British left.

Socialist Challenge

Fortunately, we didn't make a binding decision about SC before we'd had enough time to think about our whole future and also what to do about SU. We've put back the SC decision until early in 1978. We should start to think about it again now, although not to the exclusion of all else.

Let's take an active part in the debate about SC and tell IMG, Workers League and everybody who wants to listen what we think about the kind of mass paper we need. A page in SC by us should start the debate. I don't see why we should rule the possibility of eventually transforming SC into a paper with better politics and presentation, more popular in appeal, more useful in agitation, and controlled by an editorial board on which both IMG and Big Flame form a minority.

coalition

Can a ~~coalition~~ paper serve any useful purpose? Won't its line be too diffuse? Maybe. What I'm proposing is a process. A paper which starts with the aim of building a close political link with people in struggle can develop a clear agitational line even if more than one organisation is involved. It's hard for two or three groups and a bunch of independents to act coherently, but it may be easier if we take into account the impact of the class struggle, compelling the editors to take up a line week after week. That kind of experience could cut IMG (or us) to shreds. But who can pretend that to carry on forever with our paper really makes much sense when there is a chance that we can help to produce a weekly? Anyway, this is the proposal I put forward for debate.

In reply to those who ask why I didn't support the SC motion in the referendum, there are two points:

- a) I think it would have been disastrous to have thrown ourselves into SC before we had sorted out all the other problems inside BF. Our comrades badly needed time to think things through and to feel that they were in control of what was going on.
- b) We are now in a better position to ask the IMG to take a back seat on SC, to set up national meeting of all those interested in the paper to work out a new structure, because they have realised how difficult it will be to make the paper work unless they can attract the support of BF, Workers League and then all the others who would come in if they thought conditions were right.

Finally...

This is really a memo to the Secretariat and the NC. Too often we have a mechanical, technical idea of leadership in Big Flame. Too often, decisions are taken at the top regardless of the needs of the membership. We are all busy. We don't have endless time for debates. It's easy to decide to organise a national conference, say, but that is also a decision to disrupt BF's work for a period of two months. Let's cut to the minimum the organising of meetings. But let's step up our ability to respond to political events as a mass intervention group. And let's try to improve the level and quality of our understanding. The best thing the NC could do is to make sure that we produce an assessment of the current situation which provides the framework in which we work, and that this is updated several times a year. And it would make a big difference to the whole of our activity if the women comrades would take on the responsibility to help to prepare that assessment. So long as it's seen as men's work, women's participation in NC's stays low.