

DRAFT OF ARTICLE FOR SOCIALIST REGISTER: BIG FLAME HISTORY & POLITICS

I. THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW POLITICS

In June 1979, a number of Far Left organisations from different countries came together on a common platform to use the context of the EEC Elections to raise key issues under the theme - 'Against the Bosses Europe: For workers' Unity'. The organisations involved, included some of the most significant revolutionary Marxist groupings in Europe, notably Ventresocialisterne (VS:Denmark), Democrazia Proletaria (DP:Italy), Movimento Comunista (MC:Spain), Kommunistischer Bund (KB:Germany) and the Organisation Communist des Travailleurs (OCT:France). DP succeeded in getting a representative elected to the European Parliament, while VS and MC have representatives at national levels. (1)

One of the smaller groupings involved was Big Flame as the English component of the Co-ordination. In Britain and Europe, Big Flame has had an influence out of proportion to its size in debates among socialist militants. This emphasises the central importance given by militants to questioning vital aspects of socialist theory and practice. The major theme of this article is an attempt to situate such re-thinking and the contribution of Big Flame, in the context of the emergence of a new independent Marxist current on an international scale, before, during and after the re-surgence of class and social struggles in the late 1960's.

Despite attempts to stick a common label on this 'tendency', like 'soft Maoist' (2) it is not politically unified. Nor does it have any desires or pretensions to be a 'Fifth International'. What they have in common is an attempt to critically evaluate existing political traditions in the light of changes in the nature of capitalist societies. As the Movimento Comunista put it:

"Too often past legacies or external contributions are assimilated uncritically, leading to simple repetition instead of contrasting them with reality and discarding what is erroneous. This has impoverished and atomised the revolutionary left, leading not to a clear divide between revolutionaries and reformist, but to the multiplication of dogmatic sects." (3)

Many of the cadres forming the new organisations were ex-members of the orthodox Socialist and Communist Parties, as well as from Trotskyist, ^{and} radical nationalist formations. The specific national

dimensions of these political developments were given added impetus by the uneven impact of international and domestic events. The increasing success of anti-imperialist movements in the Third World, the crisis of the super-powers of the USSR and USA, the emergence of Cuba and China as alternative 'models', were all felt differently according to the location and assimilation into the existing political traditions of each country. When combined with the uneven development of worker, student, regional, womens' and other struggles, diverse political development was guaranteed.

In retrospect, looking back over the last decade, common themes do appear among the new organisations in addition to the points already mentioned. The most prominent of these include:

- *A changed and wider conception of the working class than held by other currents, focussing on the less skilled mass worker, immigrants, tenants and those on the 'margins' of modern capitalism.
- *Consequently, a greater sympathy and support for new movements, not only of women and gay people, but national, regional and cultural struggles.
- *Trying to react by constructing more open forms of organisation than the traditional vanguard or social-democratic types, with an emphasis on the personal life of the militant and pre-figurative socialist politics.
- *A positive assessment of the Cultural Revolution in China, seeing it as evidence of mass politics, a possibility of avoiding the Russian model and an emphasis on the transformation of social as well as property relations in the transition to socialism.

Yet this is retrospective. It is more important to grasp the process of practical and theoretical development that led in these directions. This is particularly important for Big Flame, for our starting points in the late 1960's were very different. Big Flame started life as a local socialist newspaper put together by a group of left-wing activists and rank and file workers of various ideological persuasions. It had a specific Merseyside flavour and politically reflected the period of trade union disenchantment with the Labour Government in its last years. The actual politics, however, were based primarily on information about the system and struggles against it, rather than any line. Its orientation was primarily industrial and it built up a very big sale in the larger factories. Even the name reflected

industrial roots, being based on the title of a TV play dealing with the imaginary occupation of the Liverpool docks by port workers.

Yet, information was a political issue, as rank and file workers were not getting it from the official labour movement. 'Student-worker' links may not have been as dramatic as in Italy and France, but it manifested itself in initiatives like Big Flame, who were prepared to popularise new ways of organising, tactics and demands for a growing number of militants seeking alternatives.

Of course, once information is discussed as politics, it was impossible for the original co-alition putting out the paper to survive the inevitable divisions. The nucleus left was made up of people breaking from rival orthodoxies of Leninism and libertarianism. They found themselves thrown into the Pilkington strike in 1971, which was a significant indicator of just how far workers often had to struggle against their own union machines, as well as the employers. Big Flame became almost the official paper of the strike committee, and the lessons learnt were useful in a series of servicing jobs that the political collective did for shop stewards' committees and groups of workers in disputes at Fords, in the Post Office and other places in that year. For while the paper itself collapsed, there was plenty of call for political and technical help with leaflets and other initiatives. The major general initiative was put into an abortive attempt to set up a Merseyside Rank and File Committee.

The rather limited servicing role adopted was a reaction to existing left-wing theory and practice. For even those outside the 'official' movement, mainly Trotskyists, had not broken from manipulative and bureaucratic political methods. These primarily consisted of making demands on Labour and trade union leaders in order to 'expose' them, calling for general strikes that had no chance of happening and endless new leaders in preference to different politics and ways of organising. Despite the denunciations of existing political programmes, working class politics was still seen as defensive, largely economistic trade unionism, socialism being the sphere of Party propaganda and special occasions like elections and May Day rallies. It was no accident that the organisation seeking to break most from these traditions on the Far Left - the International Socialists - and which put most emphasis on rank and file activity, grew fastest in these conditions.

In opposing these ideas, beyond being committed to exploring new ways of building independent working class activity, Big Flame did not have a well formed political alternative. Nor did the practice extend beyond the industrial sphere. By the middle of 1971, the activists were formed into a number of sexually mixed 'base groups' comprised of internal and external militants at places like Fords, Standards and Plesseys. The stress was still mainly on servicing the struggle. Anything more structured and politically directed was seen, misleadingly, as detracting from working class self-activity.

More positively, emphasis was laid on learning through practice. This slow and uneven process would have been helped by being more aware of earlier experiences like that of the British New Left of the late 1950's. Their opposition to a tradition on the Left, which had come to see the Party as the subject of history and the working class as passive object, allied to the struggle against theoretical dogmatism, had much to offer. But for the 'children of 68', that is when history began, and the older groups which had tended to drift away from explicit revolutionary socialist theory and practice were seen as 'part of the problem'. Big Flame's main source of inspiration and influence was to come from parallel groups abroad, notably in Italy. The next section explores the basic political foundations of this new tendency in the early 1970's.

2. THE TRANSFORMATION OF CAPITALISM AND SOCIALISM

"We believe that the 'old' answers offered to that problem by Lenin, the Comintern of the 1921-23 period and Trotsky...remain completely relevant today. The revolutionary Marxist programme is nothing but the codification of 150 years of international proletarian class struggle...Why should one assume that the 'new' experiences of the class struggle would transcend the lessons of, say, the experience of the class struggle in Russia 1917-27, Germany 1905-1923, Italy 1914-27, Spain 1931-39, France 1932-40 and Britain 1914-31, upon which our programme is based". (Mandel: 'The 4th International: 40 Years On') 4

Only a fool would believe that there is nothing to learn from the historical experiences of class struggle. But Mandel's statement perfectly illustrates the tendency for orthodox Marxism to aggregate experiences in an historically undifferentiated way; thus to be consumed under the label of 'lessons of class struggle', kindly kept for us in the memory of the party. In contrast, the need for new theories, tactics or programmes, arises from the fact that such struggles unfold inside changing relationships between Capital, State and the working class. It is our premise that there have been significant changes in these relationships, such as to render useless any notion that there is one 'epoch' of capitalism stretching back from the first quarter of this century to today. At the same time, the experiences of reformist social democracy in Europe and consolidation of a new form of class society in Russia and other countries has decisively modified conceptions of socialism.

In Big Flame's practice in the car factories of the early 1970's, we tried to come to terms with some of the changes in the terrain of class struggle. For these factories were at the frontier of the most 'advanced' forms of capitalist organisation of production, altering the nature of work and the working class. Workers in the mass production sectors proved less receptive than the older skilled sectors to the Left's traditional slogans of nationalisation, workers' control and the like. What they experienced as oppressive about capitalism was particularly the nature of the work itself. During a period of years we found ourselves involved in battles over speed-up sackings, the power of supervision, guaranteed lay-off pay, shorter hours and many other issues.

Such issues are often ignored or undervalued by the Left, seen as economic rather than political. This is not to say that they are always seen as political by workers. The task of revolutionary organisation is to try and make those links and generalise the most

advanced forms of demands, consciousness and organisation. Without building from these day-to-day issues, socialism ceases to have any meaningful connection to peoples' experiences. When, in one of our leaflets, we talked of "taking control of working conditions", it did not refer to formalised control through negotiations, but the control that workers exert over line speeds job allocation, overtime and anything else that challenges managements' 'right to manage'.

The other major aspect of our experience at this time, was that the workers who were the most willing to fight were not necessarily the factory leadership or the most ideologically socialist. Shop stewards committees who had invited us to co-operate with them, often cooled off when we and other workers wanted to carry on continuous mass political work at the plants. Our aim became to build a leadership of the most active and conscious militants in the struggle, rather than emphasising the conventional Left tactics of winning majorities at poorly attended Branch meetings, or even on the stewards' committees.

In retrospect, the separation of the two tactics was wrong, but it did provide us with an important critical perspective on the limited politics and growing bureaucratisation of the shop stewards' movement when most Left organisations industrial strategy consisted of asking 'how many stewards have you got?'. (5) So, while we tended to over-generalise our experiences of this period, it did give us invaluable insights into the dynamics of mass workplace politics which have been put to later use in initiatives like the building of the highly successful Ford Workers Group, which is active inside and outside the union structures and maintains a genuine independence as a rank and file body.

From practice to a theory of practice

Those insights gained in the early 1970's, were consolidated by an interaction with events in Italy. Visits and exchanges of militants were to form a strong connection between Big Flame and Lotta Continua, the largest of the new left organisations formed out of the 'Hot Autumn' of 1969. The emergence of a new Marxist current in Italy in the post-war period was linked to an explicit theorisation about changes in capitalist production, creating a labour process based on Taylorist and Fordist lines, re-shaping the working class in the image of a massified, de-skilled labour force, corresponding to Marx's collective labourer.

During the 1960's, the mass worker of the assembly lines, often young immigrants from the south, began to emerge as the motive force of anti-capitalist struggles. This reached its high point in the 'Hot Autumn' of 1969, where a generalised industrial confrontation embodied a rejection of the contemporary features of wage labour, with consequent struggles against work gradings and hierarchies, speed-ups and manning levels, and for equal wage rises. This movement was independent of the union organisations and the orthodox Left parties. But the Italian New Left's description of the process as workers' autonomy did not refer merely to the independence of working class action.

The concept was meant to refer to the autonomy from the new features of the post-war capitalist state. Despite variations from country to country, Keynesian reforms meant that modern capitalism was based on the use of state and factory planning as the cornerstone of the stability of the system. To avoid the slumps and confrontation of the inter-war years, emphasis was placed on the integration of the working class, through the incorporation of its organisations and the use of wage struggles as a stimulus to competition and production.

If the working class was to assert its own needs, it therefore had to contest these terrains. Consequently, the two central struggles were seen as 'wages independent of productivity', and the 'refusal of work' (ie. on the terms of Capital). The concept of an autonomous working class structured around the figure of the mass worker, was also explicitly counterposed to the orthodox Communist idea of a hegemonic working class inside a class bloc or alliance. Instead, the proudly proclaimed 'workerism' of the New Left was extended to the theory that the course of capitalism was leading to the proletarianisation of other sections of society. As the workers were being de-skilled, so were the students being de-qualified. Thus there was a material basis for the student revolt, rather than members of the petit-bourgeoisie betraying their class. The leading role of young workers and students was used to challenge the traditional Left concept of leadership resting in an externally defined vanguard. While leadership was necessary, the task of the revolutionary organisation was to help consolidate the mass vanguards formed out of the new struggles and a specific understanding of their own oppression.

The central ideas of the Italian New Left quickly found resonance

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among the Left in other countries. (6) The notion of the working class as the motive force of capitalist development challenged the pre-dominant conception of the working class as a passive product of historical forces. The identification of the capitalist features of state and factory planning confronted the orthodoxy which identified planning with socialism; Lenin's admiration of Taylorism being one example. The positive location of radical content to industrial struggles undermined the separation between politics and economics that was a parallel feature of reformism and Leninism.

For us in Big Flame, many of the ideas helped us to understand the evolution of British capitalism and our own experiences within it. Prior to our formation we'd had the six years of Labour Government, which had emphasised the empty content of a 'socialism' based on re-structuring capitalism, exemplified in Wilson's 'white hot heat of technological revolution'. Meanwhile the growth of unofficial action and organisation in the working class movement heralded great possibilities for the brand of 'mass politics' we had become committed to.

The resulting theory and practice helped us to develop into a small, national organisation by the mid-1970's. Local group practice was often based on mass leaflet campaigns, or factory and community bulletins, whose most consistent emphasis was the attempt to find the 'seeds of communism' in daily struggles that would build confidence and political consciousness. Instead of repeating the refrain, 'if only we had the right leaders', we stressed the need to transform the existing movement. The much referred to 'hold of reformism' is not merely present in particular programmes or ideas, but in ways of doing things; in sectionalism and delegation of struggles. But in recent years the emphasis of our practice has changed. While maintaining a mass politics perspective, we work more inside official labour movement institutions and Left campaigns, with political perspectives also relating to the general-state level.

While this is a reflection of changing circumstances of a downturn in class struggle related to the long economic crisis, it has meant an implicit modification of the original set of ideas comprising the 'autonomy' theory. There had always been weaknesses in the ideas, notably a thorough-going economism. While the use of the wage was central to modern capitalism, this does not mean that

wage struggles, even when militant and egalitarian, can be the focus for the development of a revolutionary challenge to Capital. This economism is linked to the extreme emphasis put on the composition of the working class. Changes in the structure of class relations was used to ignore or underestimate the sphere of consciousness, ideology and programme, one article commenting, "the assembly line and class consciousness today form one single reality". (7) In addition, a too rigid application of the proletarianisation concept covered over differences in conditions and consciousness and gave a rationale for by-passing genuine problems of alliances of class and social forces.

These weaknesses were exacerbated by a failure to react quickly enough to changes in the form of capitalist development that were the basis for the original set of ideas. The task of the revolutionary left was seen as finding means in class struggle to 'block capitalist development'. But while struggles on the terrain of the workplace and the wage could help to put the system into inflationary and competitive crises that undermined Keynesian mechanisms of state control; they could not resolve this crisis in the interests of the working class. The central slogan of 'more money - less work' became totally inadequate as a prolonged recession developed.

The attempt by Capital and the parties operating within the bourgeois political arena to find solutions to these long term trends, have led to numerous new measures. These include rationalisation and re-structuring of industry, intervention by the state in the form of incomes policies and legal measures against workers' organisation, control of social expenditure, increased use of fiscal and monetary policies and inside the workplace, re-structuring of payment systems and work organisation, attacking the power of informal means of control exercised by workers.

The Italian New Left and similar forces, also failed to recognise that the forms of autonomous organisation could not be sustained in the new situation. There was an inevitable shift back to the union organisations at national and local level as workers were put on to the defensive. While organisations like Lotta Continue did drop their "we are all delegates" position and start working inside local union structures, a satisfactory long-term strategical perspective was not developed. The importance of reformist organisations was recognised, but a mass politics approach was never given an adequate tactical basis for the period of extended downturn;

Big Flame was not as rigidly tied to the original framework of ideas. Therefore we have had a long struggle to re-situate and build from them in the new terrain. We return to this theme in the concluding section.

The Social Factory

An immediate example of the differences in our political trajectory from Italian events, is indicated in attitudes to the emergent movements among women and of community struggles. The 'workerism' of the Italian New Left sometimes literally meant that. The consequent narrowness of theory and practice was broken early in Big Flame's political development by a process we have so far given little emphasis to.

In 1972, the women militants left the industrial base groups in Liverpool. Influenced by the beginnings of feminism, they made an important critique of the existing politics, based on their experience in factory activity. The obvious hierarchies of power and knowledge were related to definitions of what was useful political activity. Male workers took Big Flame women less seriously or romanticised them, ^{while} our orientation solely towards factory work left unchallenged the position of wives and girlfriends and the issues in the wider spheres of social life. As one internal document of the time put it: "men are in the natural vanguard because their wives and mothers are doing the work at home - it's as simple as that".

This led to the women meeting separately and imposing on the whole group a rejection of the idea that the fight against sexism was secondary to the 'real' class struggle. As we developed nationally, these principles of independent organisation and definition of politics meant that womens' groups were seen as a necessary part of Branch life and out of these initiatives a Womens' Commission on a national level was formed. The early developments in Liverpool were consolidated through involvement in the community struggles that developed in response to the rent rises and housing policies associated with the Tory 'Fair Rents Act'. Consequently, changes in our political ideas were facilitated by a shift in the forms of activity, as we sunk roots into working class communities in North Liverpool and Tower Hill in Kirkby.

The latter community organised the only total rent strike in Britain. Lasting 15 months it ended in the jailing of a number of strike leaders. Big Flame militants had met women tenants through joint activity, who wanted to start a womens' group on the estate. As the rent strike developed the main role of the group was to help give expression to

the specific demands of women. The main thing we learned was that the involvement of women was not a useful bonus, but the necessary backbone to the struggle given their centrality to conditions in the home and in the community. ↑ In trying to come to a clearer understanding of this process theoretically, we once again interacted with events in Italy. *Add point on centrality of position of housewives specifically.* In response to a growing number of social struggles, Lotta Continua launched its 'Take Over the City' campaigns in the early 1970's. They recognised the need to set up a 'second front' in the fight for working class autonomy. Existing struggles had reached a ceiling in the factory, while the ruling class could re-cuperate any gains by exerting its control in education, welfare, prices and so on. This recognition involved important modifications to the balance of the previously factory-dominated political activity. Nurseries, squatting, alternative markets and information centres were all a focus for action. Though the two most significant and mass campaigns were those for 'self-reduction' of payment of bills and prices, and housing struggles in Milan. The victory in the latter case, ended with a celebratory demonstration called by Lotta Continua which attracted 80,000 people.

For them and for us in Big Flame it also meant an attempt to develop theoretical insights into these questions. This was structured around the concept of the 'social factory', a term used to represent the increasing penetration of Capital into all spheres of social life. As with industrial policy, Western ruling classes had realised that they could not deny, as in the inter-war years, working class demands for health, welfare, education and housing services. State control and planning gave the possibility of utilising the aspirations of the mass of people to create institutions which helped stabilise capitalism and increase ruling class control. In welfare for instance, comprehensive policies of National Insurance, pensions and benefits made sure that 'non-productive' sectors of the economy were under control, influence and 'discretionary powers'. There was a direct line to the family through systems of tax and allowances. The most functional family for modern capitalism is an institution which is a system of social production itself, where women re-produce the labour power needed in the factories, offices and schools.

The other major political insight was that in rejecting the view that all struggles in the community and social sphere were less important and reformist, we moved towards a concept of pre-figurative politics. We recognised that in bringing more aspects of life in

its tentacles, Capital was making it necessary for the Left to drastically widen its range of interventions. Within this, also trying to find ways of challenging capitalist domination of culture and life-style. This broke with a tradition of leaving these problems until 'after the revolution'; as Lotta Continua commented in 'Take Over the City' - "The Proletariat must change themselves even before taking power".

These theoretical developments helped us to consolidate more diverse forms of practice. Community interventions developed in other cities around re-housing, right to fuel, local papers, the 'Red Market' in East London and many other examples. There was also growing activity in the 'service' sector, another area traditionally under-played by the Left. The most important of these was in health, where consistent activity in hospitals by Big Flame militants is still carried on today in our involvement in the 'Fightback' campaign against spending cuts. Emphasis has always been given to building links between factory and community struggles. One concrete example of this is the necessity to help, organise strike support groups among wives and girlfriends of male workers. But we do not see this only as women supporting men or avoiding attempts to split the unity of the class. It also needs to take into account the independent needs of women, using the 'social factory' ideas. The Ford Langley Action Committee elected a strikers wife as Chairperson; she commented:

"The union challenged me on the picket line and said that I wasn't a Ford worker. I said, 'Yes I am a Ford worker', and they said, 'Which department do you work in?' So I said that my department was at home, getting my husband into work on time and washinh his clothes, that's ny department. Whatever happens to him affects me".

Political activity and theoretical writing about social struggles have been taken up by many other people, sometimes avoiding the weaknesses of our analysis, while sharing many of the problems. (9)
It is certainly very difficult to sustain community interventions and the 'Take Over the City' strategy in Italy over-estimated the possibilities of maintaining the bases won in struggles and the durability of forms of organisation thrown up in its course. The social factory analysis, was like its industrial counterpart, susceptible to economism. So much emphasis was laid on the links to production and state intervention, that the contradictory nature of services - part genuine working class need, part ruling class control - was sometimes lost sight of. in a welter of conspiracy theory based on an analysis of the latest 'plan' of Capital.

The Nature of Socialism

At the same time as socialists were having to come to terms with changes in capitalism, the spread of Russian-type regimes in Eastern Europe was forcing a re-evaluation of the nature of socialism. The attempt to understand this process has been a source of immense confusion on the Left and in a tradition where your position on Russia defined the ideological label an organisation was assigned, not to have a position was tantamount to heresy. Yet this the situation for Big Flame in its early years. We preferred our position to come gradually from trying to understand our own societies and our practice within it, as it is only possible to define one mode of production in relation to another.

However, we were given a push towards a more global analysis through the critique of Trotskyism we developed as part of our theory and practice in the mid-seventies. Like many others on the Left we were not happy with the idea of Eastern European societies as 'de-generated workers states', with its division between a 'socialist economy', but bureaucratic power structure. Yet there were overlaps with the Trotskyist analysis of changes in capitalism. For instance, in his book 'Marxist Economic Theory', Mandel says that: "the increasing practice of intervention in the economy by the state is an involuntary homage rendered to socialism by capitalism". (10)

This double confusion essentially derives from the traditional analysis of the 2nd and 3rd International's which identified socialism with nationalised property relations. Nor was this confusion confined solely to Marxism. The Left of the Labour Party has identified socialism with 'clause four' common ownership. For a number of years after the basic reforms of the 1945-51 Labour Government, the Left were hard put to call for anything else but more nationalisations as the route to socialism. Meanwhile the social democrats were content to believe that state intervention, planning and welfare were sufficient in themselves to complete the tasks of creating Labour's old vision of the 'socialist commonwealth'.

What is the source of this varied confusion over what constitutes the essential basis of socialism compared to contemporary capitalism? The Italian New Left argued that the key division stemmed from differing understandings within Marxism of the concept of the contradiction between the development of the forces of production and the relations of production. The dominant tradition within Marxism

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had come to identify the relations of production with property relations. Everything else concerned with the social relations embodied in the capitalist labour process are seen as part of the productive forces defined in narrow, neutral and technical terms. Consequently, the nationalisation of the means of production eliminates the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, and Russia may be defined as socialist or a workers' state.

The alternative conception regards the main productive force as the working class itself and therefore the development of the labour process as the product of a class struggle. Hence science and technology are imprinted by this conflict; "In other words, productive forces are not definable outside of their link with the relationships of production." (11) For an analysis of Russia, this means that the changes in property relations are only the first step. The socialist transformation of society requires the revolutionising of the social relations of production and society; not only the nature of work, but the relations between the sexes, hierarchies of mental and manual labour and so on.

Without this understanding, socialism becomes a stunted concept. In its gradualist version, only the state superstructure of capitalism is questioned, socialism 'growing out of' the forces of capitalist production. But even its revolutionary variants tended only to see the state and the market as obstacles to the development of those forces. For both, in different ways: "The contradiction between productive forces and relationships of production becomes a contradiction between factory and society and not a contradiction inside the factory and in society." (12)

For our co-thinkers in Europe who developed this approach, the inevitable consequence was a negative evaluation of the Russian model. This was re-inforced by a widespread positive response to developments in China, particularly the Cultural Revolution. The emphasis on continuing class struggle against new elites in party and society, the attempts made to overcome fragmentation of work and mental and manual divisions, the rejection of the neutrality of technology, production systems and wage payment schemes; these and many other aspects of events were seen as a positive alternative, not only to Russia, but to traditional definitions of what constituted the basis of a transition to socialism.

Almost all of these gains have been reversed since the death of Mao. Not suprisingly, this has put Maoist organisations into a severe decline and crisis. This was never the case with Big Flame or other similar European organisations. Our positive interest in events in China did not amount to an identification with the detail of domestic, let alone the counter-revolutionary foreign policy of the regime. Nevertheless, to have ever referred to China as in a transition to socialism was a mistake. We underestimated the fragility of the gains of the cultural revolution, because we did not place enough emphasis on the lack of proletarian democracy at state level. In our emphasis on the transformation of social relations, we failed to make clear that such changes are inter-dependent with democracy as a basis for socialism. This failure was rooted in ambiguities about the relations between party, state and working class power in the struggle for socialism, a point returned to in the final section of this article.

A number of our co-thinkers have made self-criticisms in the course of breaking from 'pro-Chinese' positions. (13) But one positive by-product is that the experience has led to a more thoroughgoing understanding of the nature of socialism. This has particularly been the case with Big Flame, in that we used the debate to build on our analysis that Russia and Eastern Europe constituted class societies of a new type. This position was first developed in our pamphlet on Trotskyism and confirmed at our 1976 Conference, with further pamphlets more recently. (14)

The analysis argues that a 'third mode of production' has appeared, representing a major alternative method of economic, social and political development, rather than accidental de-generations from capitalism or socialism. After a failure to consolidate the revolutionary process in Russia, a system gradually evolved that was: "A new antagonistic class system with its own specific dynamic in which elements similar to other systems acquire a new function". (15) We describe such societies as 'state collectivist'. Economic resources are collectively 'owned' and controlled by a fused party-state apparatus. A new ruling class is formed out of the monopoly of political and economic power. This class appropriating the surplus labour of subordinate classes who have no say in the production and distribution of the surplus. The resulting social privileges and control of the distribution of opportunity provides the basic means of re-production and perpetuation of themselves as a class.

State Collectivism, as a theory for explaining the reality of the 'second world', obviously breaks with the rival orthodoxies on the Far Left that describe such societies as de-generated workers' states or as state capitalist. The former rests on a conception of socialism so narrow that it is believed that a 'political revolution' will be sufficient to restore socialism, leaving untouched the supposedly healthy economic base. The latter recognises the need for much deeper transformation but cannot break from existing theoretical categories in asserting the existence of capitalism despite the absence of generalised commodity production.

The development of new Marxist categories for understanding the second world was long overdue. The key element remains the emphasis on the centrality of the transformation of social relations of production and society as the pre-condition for a transition to socialism. Without such changes, the state monopoly of political and economic power embodied in nationalised property relations merely provides the basis for the emergence of class formations of a new type.

The debate about the nature and dynamic of such societies has only just begun from this fresh perspective. There remain differences of emphasis between those who see state collectivism as mainly applicable to the harsh economic conditions of the 'under-developed' world, or whether it is a model that encompasses advanced capitalist societies. ⁽¹⁶⁾ In the latter case, avoiding the appearance of a new form of class society depends very much on the type of socialism we fight for and the support we give to autonomous movements and struggles that challenge capitalist, patriarchal and racist social relations. These are some of the themes of the following section.

3. PARTY, CLASS AND MOVEMENTS

The other significant area highlighted by a practical and theoretical involvement in social struggles, was the importance of divisions inside the working class and other strata in society. Such divisions are not so much ignored in orthodox Marxism, but misunderstood, as this typical quote from a Letter to Socialist Challenge shows:

"..sexism on the part of workers has a different basis than that of employers and supervisors. In the former case it is an expression of false consciousness, in the latter of class interest. Male workers have no class or material interest in the oppression of women". (17)

Similar references have been made to relations between white and black and other divisions. The concept of false consciousness is a problematical one in Marxism, but applied to divisions in society, its consequences are extremely dangerous. In asserting that divisions are ideological illusions, it denies that, for instance, men or white people as a whole have benefited from the oppression of women or blacks. Once that denial is politically accepted, then emphasis is put on divisions created by wicked capitalists or the media becoming solved by the programmatic intervention of socialists.

To put it in more organisational terms, the party is seen as the guardian of the 'general interests of the working class', under which are subsumed any specifically oppressed sector. This concept of course, only holds up when the working class is defined as those at the point of production. For us, the unification of the working class and all the oppressed can never be a purely subjective problem.

of tactics and teaching. At the basis of the divisions are the material structures relating to the division of labour in capitalism on a national and international scale.

In the context of this division of labour, the politics of 'unite and fight' are inadequate because they do not challenge the hierarchy, nor do they provide an effective means of mobilising people with different needs. Unity and common struggle are important, particularly at a time of defence against Tory attacks. But such attacks can be successful, precisely because they build on those divisions. Therefore we must confront and not paper over them.

When white textile workers do not come out on strike with their Asian fellow workers, it is not merely because they are dupes. Compared to the Asian workers they do have better working conditions, it is not them who have to work the permanent night shifts. A

layer of privileges exists which is a legacy both of our imperialist past and the features of post-war immigration at workplace and community levels. Similarly, between the sexes, we can only understand the slow progress of the trade union movement on issues affecting women if we take into account the sexual stratification of the labour force. Nor can sex hierarchies be conceived of in terms of a narrow band of economic privileges. All men, even those who oppose sexism, have their lives made easier by womens' traditional domestic functions. Such divisions are cemented into power relations by practices and ideas which have become so deep-rooted that we barely notice their existence. These influence patterns of sexuality, childrearing and many other social relations aside from housework. (18)

None of the above means that the divisions are irreconcilable, or that socialism, feminism and anti-racism are not compatible. The task of socialists, particularly those in revolutionary organisations, is twofold. First to generalise the struggle of the oppressed group, often when it has the least voice and against if necessary, the short term interests of other more privileged sections. Secondly, to find those points of unity that certainly do exist and to link both processes to a longer-term community of interest.

But a general political organisation cannot be the main vehicle for dealing with the specific oppressions of race, sex or other dimensions. The prime requirement is that of autonomous organisation of the group itself. This recognition has become a little more widespread on the left over the last decade, but it remains incomplete. This is because the recognition has been limited to the sphere of organisation, to the literal translation of autonomy - self-government. This is important, in building self-confidence and confronting the oppressive power relation. Hence the spread of womens' or black caucuses in a variety of organisations and movements. But it is empty without political autonomy, yet this is what frightens many on the Left: "But we do not defend their autonomy from revolutionary socialist politics, that is to say from the historic interests of the working class". (19)

That quote was from the IMG, yet is is not unrepresentative. The Communist Party pays lip service to feminism, yet it remains in a separate compartment to the rest of their politics, the SWP

regards its organisations of women and black people as arms of the party; and Tony Benn calls on the autonomous movements to affiliate to Labour. (20) For socialist feminists, or black socialists, autonomy does not mean being separate from revolutionary socialist politics, but having the capacity to transform it, recognising that the so-called historic interests of the working class have excluded vital parts of its own ranks. Only the oppressed groups themselves can adequately understand and analyse their conditions and the solutions to it. Such political self-definition is different from separatism held by radical feminists or black nationalists. This does not seek to transform socialism, as the conflicting groups are seen as permanently locked into antagonistic struggle.

This question of the relationships between general political organisation and autonomous movements has been at the core of the important debate centred around the 'Beyond the Fragments' book. It has helped focus the opposition to the idea that socialism or Marxism or given and historically static bodies of ideas, to which the demands of specifically oppressed groups are 'added on'. The necessity for a transformative effect from feminism and other new movements has long been held and fought for by Big Flame, the experience of which has been brought together in a recent pamphlet, 'Walking a Tightrope'. (21)

But the debates round 'Beyond the Fragments' and the work of other feminists has posed a further question concerning the adequacy of the two major models for revolutionary socialism, that of Marxism and Leninism themselves. By focussing on the tools necessary to understand the position of women in capitalism, they have questioned the relationships between class and sex, specifically rejecting the subordination of the spheres of patriarchy and re-production to those of capitalism and production.

The beginnings of this debate lay in the attempt to stretch Marxist analysis to analyse the position of women in the home, which led to the debates on domestic labour. Out of the political work Big Flame did in working class communities in the early 1970's, we had argued for the pivotal role of housework, a document from the Womens Commission in 1976, stating: "women's position in modern capitalist society hinges on the unwaged work we do in the home. This is fundamental to the exploitation of all women in every part of our lives".

Like other socialists and feminists we are now trying to extend these understandings to a more general analysis of the relationships between patriarchy and capitalism. Many of these issues remain unresolved, as 'Walking the Tightrope' points out:

"There still remains much to be done to deepen our understanding of the relationships between sex and class. But we feel clear that neither should be subordinate to the other in our theory or practice. In our day to day practice we live out the contradictions and try to overcome them". (22)

However, what many people in these debates feel to be resolved in a clearer way is the need to reject Leninism. This is the specific focus of the Sheila Rowbotham part of the 'Fragments' book. In an often penetrating critique, she argues that the authoritarianism rooted in Leninist definitions of politics and organisation make it impossible to alter it and make it compatible with new experiences and movements. Such a view has been seized on by many 'non-aligned' socialists as further confirmation that a party or general political organisation is unnecessary, dangerous or at best premature. We believe this to be a mistake. On the contrary it is a vital task to re-situate the concept of general political organisation deriving from the traditions of Marxism and Leninism in the context of a modern capitalist society.

Reconciling this view with the recognition of divisions of class, sex and race and the consequent need for autonomous organisation has never been easy. At times it has been a serious source of dissension inside Big Flame. For instance, after our first national conference in 1975, our East London Group and some of their supporters split off on this question. They held the view that the 'divisions embodied in the 'hierarchy of labour powers' were so deep rooted, that the role of political organisation had to be limited to a general sharing of experiences within a federal structure. Unity between different sections of the working class and other layers of society had to be postponed until power differentials had been resolved. (23) The majority of the organisation held the view that points of unification were possible and necessary and this required a degree of centralisation of political perspectives and activity in an organisation.

The basic function of a revolutionary socialist organisation is to build the self-activity of those engaged in struggles. This self-activity is not merely for its own sake, but flows from the idea central to Marxism, that only a self-conscious and organised working class movement can create a socialist society where people actually run their own affairs. Revolutionary organisations must intervene independently because while struggles arise from an incredible variety of sources, they do not necessarily advance in a radical direction. Socialist militants build the consciousness and organisation in an anti-capitalist way and that is done best with the back-up of an organisation. It is not a question of an organisation setting itself up as a leadership and expecting others to follow, but to be prepared to take a lead, to be inside the struggles, generalising the demands and action. This effects the way groups organise themselves. A revolutionary organisation must bring together those people who are or want to be conscious and active. It cannot carry out its tasks without a politically educated, active membership - cadres. Reformist organisations can ignore self-activity and carry passive and ill informed memberships because their socialism is handed down from above, dependent on 'representatives' acting on behalf of the working class.

The same choices are faced in the longer term. In situations where there is a possibility of radical change, the main goal of revolutionary

organisations or parties is to help develop forms of popular power which can act as alternatives to the existing state institutions and reformism, Crises of dual power are conditioned by highly complex political and even military considerations. Popular organisations do not solve problems or dissolve differences overnight. The struggle for socialism in these circumstances needs clear and politically disciplined revolutionary organisation.

These conceptions have part of their roots in Leninism. In breaking from a reformist and bureaucratised Marxism in Europe which had come to believe that socialism grew out of capitalist development, Leninism re-asserted that socialism was made by a self-active working class, politically independent of the bourgeoisie. By restoring a revolutionary political strategy, Leninism gave back to Marxist organisation, a different role and form, breaking with the parliamentary/union model. Political intervention required a 'vanguard organisation' prepared to organise the most conscious militants to combat the ruling class and its state.

Of course, some of these ideas reflect the specific conditions of Tsarist Russia. But Big Flame and its co-thinkers have always believed that the historical limits to Leninism also lie in the nature of the relations between state, capital and working class in pre-war Europe as a whole. These relations strongly conditioned conceptions of politics, consciousness, organisation and seizing power. This is insufficiently recognised by the revolutionary left today, who have generalised the Bolshevik model beyond the point of usefulness. To re-situate those ideas that remain useful from that tradition it is necessary to subject Leninism to a rigorous critique, both of the historical specificity and weaknesses of the original body of ideas. This critique has always been central to Big Flame's political development. (24)

It is impossible in this short space to draw an adequate picture either of the historical conditions or the ideas. A few general points will have to suffice. The central weakness of the Leninist legacy is the separation of political struggle led by the party against the state, and economic struggle, the daily defence of living conditions led by the unions or equivalent organisations. This distinction was influenced by the conditions of the period, where day-to-day struggles were locked into an economic terrain disconnected from the state and ruling class power in general. Lenin, indeed, argued in these terms. But he also justified the distinction by reference to an abstract theory of consciousness, where socialist ideas had to be brought to struggles incapable of generating themselves; developed in a process of theoretical production internal to the party.

What is more important than the sterile debates about organisation versus spontaneity, is that the consequence of the theory of consciousness means socialist politics becoming exterior to peoples' experiences. Those experiences are incorporated into the 'objective conditions', while the 'subjective factor' remains the property of the party. This increases the likelihood of such parties being insensitive to new developments, insistent on their monopoly of correctness and generally authoritarian in their relationships with other organisations. These ideas have been given an additional twist by the Trotskyist tradition. From its inception Trotskyism has rested on the belief that the objective conditions were ripe for revolution, the missing factor being the subjective leadership. Given the smallness of their forces, this led to an inevitable emphasis on the 'programme' as the vehicle for transmission of correct ideas to the masses whose

consciousness always seemed to lag behind 'objective reality'. The consequent programme fetishism is re-produced in a bewildering variety of demands or 'calls to action', whose only common feature appears to be a lack of connection to any possibility of their being achieved. (24)

The pre-dominant forms of organisation within Leninism have always been likely to re-inforce these trends. The problem of democratic centralism is not the principle of collective responsibility for political decisions. Without this, no organisation could function effectively or democratically. We agree with one critic who argued, "the real danger of democratic centralism is the encouragement of a monolithic and undifferentiated politics". (25) The general conception of the political relationship between party and class is re-produced in the internal regime of organisations through the domination of the leadership and the stifling of minority positions. The accompanying emphasis on the cadre as professional revolutionary intensifies the problems. This is not simply in terms of the permanent leadership of full-timers that seems to be so prominent in Left organisations. It is also that the way that they are organised makes it likely that professional revolutionaries will be people with no families, men willing or able to be moved from place to place. This not only restricts participation in leadership, it rests on a self-denying concept of politics which leads to the one-dimensional, often burnt-out cases that too often litter Left politics.

The final sphere where authoritarian relationships between the party and other components of society are dangerous is in the framework of seizing power and the post-revolutionary state. No matter what the good intentions of parties, the emphasis on the exclusive vanguard role of the party can lead to a suppression of rival views and the gradual erosion of influence of organs of popular power.

Our critique and modification of Leninism rests on the belief that these weaknesses have been compounded by changes in the nature of capitalist societies. To take one example. It cannot any longer be correct to refer to the revolutionary organisation as 'a party of advanced workers', as for instance the SWP does. The changing composition of the working class, the entry of women into waged work, the intervention of the state and capital into community life and the increased role of higher education all alter our idea of 'vanguard sectors'. Some of these changes have influenced the emergence of new, autonomous movements and independent campaigns to a much greater extent than pre-war capitalism.

Instead of the movements being conceived of as subordinate or satellite arms of the party, they should be considered parallel institutions, whose organisational and political independence should be respected. It is from the new movements, as well as new forms of industrial and community struggle that we can learn most that will aid us to develop new ideas of revolutionary organisation, infusing traditional, but necessary concepts like 'cadre and vanguard' with different and more flexible meanings. Consequently the programmes of organisations are not something developed a priori and 'inserted' into struggles, but emerge from interaction between political organisation and new movements and experiences; with structures open enough to learn from these developments.

Once this idea of a monopoly of correctness has been broken, revolutionary organisation can be a training ground for creative thought. Alongside full freedom for exchange of views and rights of tendency, participation of all must be encouraged by social arrangements for childcare, positive discrimination, checks on the

power of full-timers and many other measures. Most importantly, however, collective responsibility for decisions must not become a means of excluding the kind of publicly expressed dissent which can only strengthen the external relationships of the organisation and the general credibility of socialism. In the long term, there is no reason for us to cling to the idea that socialism will be represented by one party or line of thought, before, during or after a process of revolutionary change. With this in mind, it is not relevant today for organisations today to define themselves in terms of Leninism. Leninist and anti-Leninist are labels that indicate a refusal to make a concrete political analysis of the tasks ahead of us as socialists.

Big flame has tried to implement this type of political perspective in its practice. Our militants have consistently worked to build the autonomous movements, for instance in the National Abortion Campaign and in Womens' Aid. In addition we have often been the backbone of long term work in independent campaigns like UTOM and anti-fascist, anti-racist committees. We feel this consistent commitment is better than moving opportunistically in and out of campaigns as recruitment possibilities ebb and flow; which is unfortunately characteristic of the practice of much of the Left.

It is never easy, however, to find the right balance between a general political organisation and support for autonomous movements and independent campaigns. Often it has led to an inability to respond quickly to new events, a failure to develop collective practice above and beyond the individual commitments of members and a restricted ability to recruit and grow, due to an organisational profile so low as to disappear out of sight. In one sense, even greater problems are involved. Organisations like Big Flame are always 'walking a tightrope' in combining this variety of commitments. More traditional political currents are fond of pointing, with some sense of glee, to events like the collapse of Lotta Continua and crises effecting some of our other sister organisations like OCT and KB.

We are not a unified International and we cannot answer for other organisations. It is true that Big Flame has not sufficiently discussed things like the collapse of Lotta Continua after its 1976 Congress. (26) But we do not accept that it was an inevitable product of supporting a revolutionary organisation and autonomous movements at the same time. Those that reject one or the other find it comforting to believe that they are incompatible. But even knowing the problems, we feel that ^{it is} a tightrope that has to be walked. The consequences of avoiding it ^{that} Marxist politics will fail to become adequately grounded in the new conditions of post-war capitalist societies.

4. REFORMISM, THE STATE AND REVOLUTIONARY STRATEGY

The onset of the international recession had, by the mid-1970's decisively killed the 'politics of boom'. The strategy and modes of activity on the Far Left had implicitly assumed a short life span for capitalism. In the case of the tendency of which Big Flame is part, we have already seen how reliance was placed on militant base struggles putting the system into crisis. Instead, we, like others, were put into crisis by the increasing defensiveness of working class and radical movements.

This crisis has taken two major forms throughout the Far Left. The first has become known as the 'crisis of militancy'. A perspective of short term change inevitably brings an emphasis on total commitment and activity, sustained through the growth of mass struggles of the late sixties and early seventies. For orthodox Leninist organisations this is dealt with through the idea of the cadre and professional revolutionary. The ideology and practice of sacrifice involved tended to help produce a high turnover of militants, held together by an increasingly bureaucratic centre. Because of our emphasis on pre-figurative politics, we avoided many of the worst features of such organisations.

But we shared much of the hyper-activity alongside an overly-romantic version of the committed militant, summed up by a quote from an early Big Flame document: "We don't give ourselves to the revolution-we get ourselves from it". (27) Unfortunately when the prospect of revolution grew more distant and struggles went into a downturn, it disorientated some militants who could not adjust to a different level and type of activity, that was of a more long-term nature.

The question of activity and commitment, has, however to be situated within the other major form of crisis and re-adjustment on the Left. This is coming to terms with the durability of the system and particularly the resilience of reformism, which many had unwisely written off during the high-peaks of struggle. The bulk of the Left had predicted working class radicalisation as the recession deepened. But all over Europe the response was more likely to be a general shift to the right, with the hold of reformism if anything stronger.

The roots of these mistakes lay in economic and bureaucratic conceptions of reformism. In the first instance, reformism's grip is seen to depend

on the ability to deliver material concessions. In the second, it is held to rest on the institutional power of the trade unions and reformist parties. The latter approach is particularly characteristic of Trotskyism, which has presented reformism as something embodied in the relationship between reformist leaders and working people. Hence it is a body of ideas inserted into struggles, to be broken by placing demands on those leaders which they cannot fulfill, hence 'exposing them'. This latter approach both fosters illusions in reformism and exposes the isolation of those making the 'demands'.

Big Flame has never seen reformism as a given body of ideas and institutions. Of course, key ideas such as the neutrality of the state have immense resonance in the working class. But the power of either reformist leaders or ideas to limit struggles is not fixed and can be challenged. As we have said: "Reformism is not an external stranglehold on struggle linked to a permanently limited consciousness, it is a living relationship inside the experience of the working class". (28)

Reformism is therefore re-produced in everyday life. The continuity of the system maintains the belief that reforms are possible and desirable, because they are the most obvious ways people have of struggling to advance or defend their interests. The Labour Party and the trade unions are the most clear manifestation of this. But precisely because reformism has a living relationship to daily social conflicts, it co-exists with alternative and more revolutionary perspectives. In this sense it is important to re-iterate the distinction between reforms and reformism. Not all struggles and demands within the system are reformist. Their character depends on how and with what perspective they are fought. For instance, whether they are seen in classwide terms, the links they pose with other spheres, the challenge to capitalist social relations and the degree of control of the struggle by the participants themselves.

There are many other facets to reformism; its national chauvinism and statism to name but two. But we are trying here, to examine the relationship between reformism and the changing conditions of struggle in the 1970's. The basic weaknesses of the approach of the revolutionary Left is a failure to deal with reformism as a multi-layered phenomena. Tactics have developed to deal with its institutional and ideological power, but they have been insufficiently

grounded on the terrain of day-to-day struggle where reformism is re-produced. Big Flame's tendency has been, if anything, the reverse. We have been strong in developing alternatives at the base, but weak at relating this to developments at the level of the state, government and general political strategy.

In the past, we have only approached these questions through the prism of international events, notably in Chile and Portugal. The upsurge of popular struggle in these countries served as an inspiration for the Left the world over. For us, Chile was not just 'another struggle', "In the Chilean events we see the highest point reached by revolutionary struggle in Western capitalism since the war". (29) Between 1970 and the coup in 1973 a situation of dual power developed with a three way division between the Popular Unity Government, the ruling class forces and the institutions of popular power best represented in the Cordones Industriales and Commandos Comunales (Industrial and Area Assemblies).

In this sense the question of revolutionary strategy was posed in its sharpest form. The mass movement took place, not because the UP Government led it, but because the reformist project, irrespective of its own wishes, provided the space for a revolutionary mass mobilisation. Within the movement, the Far Left, notably the Movement of the Revolutionary Left, played a crucial role in developing the popular organisations often in areas ^{previously} ignored like peasants and shanty towns.

As the working people strongly identified with the UP programme, the MIR realised it was necessary for the revolutionary left to have a positive, if critical relationship to the Government. The MIR's strategy was to encourage the people to implement it themselves. As this began to happen, it became clear that the ruling class would not accept such a situation. The MIR pushed for the fastest possible growth of organs of popular power, while intervening within the military to weaken the reactionary grip of the right. It was a race against time that the Left lost.

There were vital lessons to be learnt. Unfortunately the British Left treated the events as textbook validations of old and new formulas. For the CP, it was evidence of the need to avoid moving too fast and upsetting the middle class. The Far Left repeated Leninist concepts about the state and political organisation;

the headline of Intercontinental Press (4th International) being "There was no revolutionary party". While the question of party and state power was important, substantial modifications to the usual scenario for revolution needed to be heeded. The first was the position of the revolutionary left as a small minority, reflecting the long-term growth of reformism. Second, the positive role played by the UP project in opening up possibilities for radicalisation. Third, the key role of popular power organisations, and fourth the long and protracted struggle itself, different from the 'storming the Winter Palace' insurrectionary events.

The overthrow of Portugal's fascist regime in 1974 by the Armed Forces Movement (MFA) provided a further context to examine some of these trends. While some on the Left saw the MFA as a form of military dictatorship on 'Bonapartist' lines, we tended to see a Chilean-type situation developing with the MFA opening up possibilities of popular power leading to a socialist revolution. Indeed the MFA itself, posed the situation in somewhat similar terms. This conception of events led Big Flame, Lotta Continua and other organisations to make some horrible blunders in over-estimating the ability of the MFA to be the vanguard of revolutionary developments. We went as far as saying:

"...that in many ways the MFA is the party of the working class, and rather more representative of the working class than either the Socialist Party or the Popular Democrats, who gained most votes". (30)

(in elections a-year after the coup)

Emodied in this position was, however, a worse error. In consistently deriding the importance of the Socialist and other parties, we not only underestimated the importance of reformism, but failed to pinpoint why it is so durable, even in the adverse circumstances of Portugal where the SP was transplanted on to the situation. Under the leadership of Soares, the SP capitalised on the vacuum at Governmental level once the high peak of popular mobilisation had passed. Despite the high peaks of the struggles, popular power institutions were not sufficiently widespread in the working class, nor geographically throughout the country. Unable to pose an alternative at state-government level popular power and its revolutionary supporters were inevitably outflanked by reformism. This was not simply a case of the balance of forces. The attachment of the masses to bourgeois democracy is not froth that can be blown away on the first publication of a revolutionary programme. It is rooted in an attachment to democratic rights, limited though they may be. The power of reformism cannot be broken unless the alternative is shown not only to be necessary, but more democratic than existing options.

Big Flame was not alone in making mistakes. For these mistakes flow from the genuine dilemma of how do revolutionary socialists relate to developments at the state level where the balance of forces are least favourable. In most of the Western capitalist countries, there is not even the advanced conditions that were pertaining in Chile and Portugal. The Trotskyist current relies on the established 'United Front' tactic of calling on Socialist and Communist Parties to form governments, expropriate the bourgeoisie and open up the road to workers' power.

Rather than calling on reformists to be revolutionaries, our tendency has supported the possible formation of Left Governments but from an honest assessment of the potential impact on further radicalisation. Like our sister organisation, the OCT, we have said that the formation of such governments will only aid the class struggle to the degree that the working class has no illusions in the process.

Necessary though such perspectives and tactics are, they remain insufficient. After all, these governments have not even come into being in France, Italy and Spain, let alone Britain! The Far Left still needs a long-term strategy. This will have to start from the unpleasant truths that the achievement of socialism is likely to be a long way off and that we are a small minority. The 'big bang' scenario of economic collapse-rapid growth-seizure of power is unhelpful to say the least. Even in a severe crisis, the modern capitalist state is no longer a series of strategic citadels to be taken. The crisis that presages the overthrow of capitalism is likely to be long, protracted and based in all major spheres of society.

These problems and the general question of reformism may seem distant at a time when things have swung further to the Right and we have a viciously reactionary Tory administration. It is true that many of our struggles in this period are inevitably defensive, with broad fronts united on a minimum political basis. But the very breadth and depth of the Tory attacks forces us to consider the relationship between an immediate response and long term goals. For instance, health, education and welfare services are not only being cut, but are under threat from the growth of private provision. In seeking to defend these services, we are forced, of necessity, to pose questions concerning their transformation. For if we do not challenge the way they have been distorted by capitalist social relations, then we will not be able to seriously mobilise people who have been disillusioned by the bureaucratic and statist way services have been run.

In this context, the moves to link Council Direct Workers with tenants over the nature of housing provision in Sheffield is one of a number of useful and similar initiatives. There are parallel trends in industry. Even apart from the famed Lucas Plan, there is a growing movement by workers' organisation to respond, not merely to Employers' plans, but to those of Labour Government's. Notable in this respect was the initiative taken by four Trades Councils to produce the 'State Intervention in Industry' report and the Conference - 'Building Working Class Power'. (31)

From the very start of the Tory administration Big Flame has called for the generalisation of such initiatives as the major means of breaking the cycle of Tory and right-wing Labour Governments, confronted by only defensive and limited working class politics. (32) The kind of examples mentioned above combine the two essential needs of counter-planning from below and independent rank and file organisation. The existence of other general challenges like the impact of new technology on jobs and skills, only heightens this need.

Nevertheless, the development of socialist alternatives from within our existing defensive stances can mean many things, some dangerous.

For some, offensive demands are counterposed to daily struggles on wages and cuts, attacked as solely sectional and economistic; rather than being a means of extending and building them. (33) Others see socialist alternatives as a means of by-passing the state level altogether. One group at the Conference of Socialist Economist conference of 1980 said that as there was 'no substantial difference between Labour and Tory rule';

"..it would be inappropriate for socialists to focus their struggle against the Tory or Thatcherite offensive, but should struggle against class rule as such, however difficult that may be, giving to the opposition to the capitalist offensive a specifically socialist content." (34)

The problem is that 'class rule' does not exist in any abstract sense, but in forms mediated through existing class relations, in plain terms, through this Tory government and this Labour Party and allied reformist institutions. Without this understanding, offensive demands are just an ultra-left adventure without any adequate tactical basis.

These tactics inevitably take us back to the question of reformism. For, like it or not, rank and file counter-planning initiatives are likely to flourish best within a context of Labour control at national or local level. This is not because Labour will lead or

even initiate such developments; in fact they may even be obstructive or hostile. It is simply because the Alternative Economic Strategy, structured around expanded public spending and state intervention, is the only possible framework within which working people can fight to impose their demands. AES policies are bound to become more important as they are the only serious alternative to monetarism at state level, and it is not a case of waiting for the next Labour Government for already some local parties are producing their own versions.

Taken as a whole, the AES is insupportable. It is still statist and top-down socialism, in parts it is chauvinistic and in general dangerously under-estimates the power of Capital to stifle any radical policies, even with the democratisation of Labour's workings. But, by critically supporting particular measures and in an overall sense creating a tactical inter-secting of grass roots and state-level initiatives, revolutionary socialists can use the space to further working class politics. In doing so, we may be able to help renew the sense of socialist vision so obviously lost over the last couple of decades.

For Big Flame, these kind of perspectives represent an attempt to develop a more adequate tactics on key aspects of general political strategy. There remains a lot more to be done on the Left to develop a transitional socialist politics that recognises the need to provide a bridge between immediate struggles and the long term fight for socialism. While this represents some some departures from our past ideas and practice, there remain important threads back to the tradition described in earlier sections. Central to this thread is our belief in the need to break down the rigid categorisation of economic and political struggles, to re-define what politics is and to go beyond defensive trade unionism in the workplace. We can no longer believe that some of the day-to-day struggles around wages or housing are in themselves an adequate political way forward. But it is necessary to draw on the 'seeds of socialism' in those struggles and on a general commitment to pre-figurative politics to build effective transitional perspectives.

Differences remain ^{in Big Flame} some serious, about the relationships between transitional politics, mass rank and file organising, support for the autonomous movements and the role of a revolutionary organisation.

Big Flame would not claim that it has solved these problems, nor that we are the only people to hold the positions outlined. We would argue, however, that we are the only organisation to combine those positions and that is trying to produce a coherent synthesis. In doing so, Big Flame is making a significant contribution to the Left..

Notes

- I. Sinn Fein also signed the original platform though they have ~~never~~ since effectively dropped out. There have been a number of additions to the Co-ordination since then, including the British SWP. A new political basis for the Co-ordination is now being drawn up.
2. This label is largely used by Trotskyists, see for instance Chris Harman, 'The Crisis of the European Revolutionary Left' in International Socialist ^{Journal} 4, Spring 1979.
3. Quoted from their article, 'On the Crisis of the Revolutionary Left in Europe', International Socialist Journal 7, Winter 1980.
4. From Socialist Challenge, 31st August 1978.
5. The early critique was put together in 'Shop Stewards and Class Struggle' (Liverpool BF: 1973).
6. For instance, many of Lotta Continua's documents were translated and published in Le Temps Moderne.
7. Material Pour L'Intervention, 'What is the Working Class', p.7. They were French followers of the Italian New Left.
8. See 'We Won't Pay - Women's Struggle on Tower Hill', BF Pamphlet, March 1975.
9. Examples include Cynthia Cockburn, 'The Local State', (London: Pluto, 1978) and London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 'In and Against the State', (London: Pluto 1980).
10. E. Mandel, 'Marxist Economic Theory', p.541, (London: Merlin Press 1968).
11. Lotta Continua, 'Theses on Materialism', from 'Documents from the 1975 Lotta Continua Congress' (BF:1976).
12. 'Ibid'.
13. See for instance, OCT, 'Revisionism in Power?' In International Socialism Journal 3, Winter 78/79.
14. See, 'The Revolution Unfinished - A Critique of Trotskyism', Paul Thompson and Guy Lewis, (BF:1977), 'Century of the Unexpected', John Fantham and Moshe Machover, (BF: 1979), and for a general discussion of this growing third position on Easter Europe, Peter Binns and Mike Haynes, 'New Theories of Eastern European Class Societies', in ISJ 7, Winter 1980.
15. Fantham and Machover, 'op cit'.
16. This debate, both within Big Flame and wider, ^{is re-produced} in 'The Nature of the So-Called Socialist Societies', (BF:1980). This was produced for a conference of the European Co-ordination in 1980 to discuss the Second World. A noticeable drift towards new class society positions and away from 'state capitalism' was apparent (except for the SWP).
17. Letter from Liz Lawrence, in Socialist Challenge, 18th October 1979.
18. These themes are taken up in the Big Flame Pamphlets, 'The Past Against Our Future; Fighting Racism and Fascism', 1979, and 'Walking a Tightrope', Big Flame Women's Pamphlet, 1980.
19. In Phil Hearse, 'On Trotskyism and the Fourth International', p31, (IMG Publications 1978). This was written as a reply to the BF pamphlet on Trotskyism.
20. For a discussion of some of these positions, see 'Crisis on The Left', Paul Thompson, Revolutionary Socialism (BF Journal) I, Summer 1977.

21. 'Walking a Tightrope', op cit.
22. Ibid, p.36, and see also Anne Philips, 'Sex and Class', Revolutionary Socialism 6, Winter 1980-81.
23. The East London group of BF drew extensively from the Wages for Housework group internationally for their analysis of class divisions. While rejecting that general analysis, the actual demand for Wages for Housework did have some support in Big Flame, but was rejected at the BF Conference in 1978.
24. The ability to make such a critique has been helped by Big Flame connecting up to critical sections from the Trotskyist movement. For instance, BF fused with a grouping that was once inside the IMG in 1978, the Revolutionary Marxist Current.
25. Richard Kuper, from a discussion paper in the International Socialist Alliance.
26. There has been some attempt to discuss the collapse of Lotta Continua, for instance, in Peter Anderson, 'The New New Left in Italy', RS 3, and 'Crisis of the Revolutionary Left in Europe', RS 5, Summer 1980.
27. From 'Notes on the Crisis and Working Class Struggle', (liverpool BF: 1973).
28. Thompson and Lewis, 'Op cit'.
29. This is taken from the BF pamphlet, 'Chile Si', 1974, but it is actually part of an article by Lotta Continua, 'The Chilean Lesson',
30. From the BF pamphlet 'Portugal: A Blaze of Freedom', 1975.
31. Coventry, Liverpool, Newcastle and Tyneside Trades Councils, 'State Intervention in Industry'- a Workers Inquiry', 1980.
32. See BF pamphlet, 'Labouring Under the Tories?' 1979.
33. Sue Slipman, 'Thatcherism, A new Stage?' Marxism Today 1980. Anyone who attacks working class demands as narrow and divisive can expect to end up where she has, in the SDP.
34. Canley Gates Cycle Club, 'The Thatcherite Offensive and the Working Class Response, CSE Conference Paper 1980.