

WHY WE NEED A DISCUSSION OF INTERNAL ORGANISATION

This is based on some notes I wrote to introduce a discussion of internal organisation in the Camden/Haringay sub group of the North London branch in March. Because the dayschool was postponed I never got a chance to use the notes, therefore I've decided to put them in the DB (expanded to take account of my experience on the NC). I want to recall some of the previous discussions of internal organisation in BF and say why I think it is important that we have a discussion now. One reason why some people are reluctant to have a discussion now is the number of similar discussions there have been in the past. In particular, there have been important discussions of principles of organisation: (a) in 1974 Merseyside BF's intervention in the Libertarian Newsletter Network, (b) in 1975 Merseyside BF's proposal that BF should move from being a purely federal organisation to having a delegate National Committee and (c) in 1978 with the constitution proposed by Robert Koch and Ian McKenzie which replaced the delegate National Committee with an elected one. I want to begin by mentioning the major arguments advanced in these and other previous debates.

Arguments against increased centralisation

Those opposed to the trend towards increased centralisation in BF have expressed their fears in the strongest terms. For Jack Brown an elected NC meant "a massive overconcentration of power", "a self perpetuating leadership" and decisions of the centre forced on "an unwilling base" ('Democratic Centralism- No Way' 1978 Pre-Conference document). For West London BF Big Flame is "becoming increasingly undemocratic", "putting party before movement" with the NC issuing "directives" and "posturing and point scoring" using "traditional macho political methods" (WLBF Motivation for Motion and 'Wot Crisis' 1980 Pre-Conference documents). These critics of our present structures accept the need for some form of national organisation. Such an organisation allows people to share experience and locate themselves in a wider national and international framework (Den Connolly 'What is BF and what kind of organisation and constitution does it need' 1978 Pre-Conference document, WLBF 'Wot Crisis'). Emphasis is placed on the rotation of leadership as ensuring democratic power remains at the base (Plan X 'Towards a New Communist Movement' 1976 Pre-Conference document) and that leaders have regular experience of working at the base (Jack Brown 'Democratic Centralism...').

In reply to these arguments the supporters of increased centralisation have argued that the leadership of a national organisation will necessarily be forced to do more than co-ordination and sharing experiences (and this was true in practice of the delegate NC). In addition to sharing experience you have to consolidate the lessons of practice by turning them into a general political perspectives which can be used to guide interventions (Merseyside BF 'From Organising to Organisation' 1974 Libertarian Newsletter document). Beyond co-ordination between branches the task of leadership is to organise debates, get responses from the membership, encourage branches to use the debates in their practice, etc (PT 'Why we need Political Centralisation in BF' DB Aug 1976). It is also argued that bitter experience proves that rotation and delegation does not work in any political effective way and that this can only be changed if leadership is continuous (Plan Y 'General Organisation and Political Perspectives' 1976 Pre-Conference document).

Arguments in favour of increased centralisation

As implied above one of the major arguments advanced is the need for greater efficiency. Thus centralisation is necessary if we are able to make the best use of our scarce resources to seriously affect struggle and make an impact at a national level (Merseyside BF 'From Organising...', Merseyside BF 'What is a BF Group' 1975 Pre-Conference Document). The necessity for political organisation is argued to arise from the needs of the struggle

which require collective discipline from those engaged in it (Ian McKenzie 'Clarifying the Party and Class debate' 1978 Pre-Conference document). Following Lenin it is argued that organisation is required to develop a total perspective when the capitalist division of labour generates a partial and fragmented experience of class struggle and when in the long term we will be faced with the task of challenging state power (Merseyside BF 'From Organising...'). Ian McKenzie, in particular, has claimed that there is much to be learnt from a critical assessment of Leninism. Lenin's notion of the party was, he believes, an important advance over the loose, passive forms of organisation of the social-democratic parties of the time. There are certain concepts which, it is claimed, are not just specific to the particular conditions of the time but which provide starting points for a revolutionary Marxist theory of organisation- the necessity for combat, interventionist organisation, an educated and committed membership. At the same time a number of criticisms are made of Leninism- the theory of consciousness which underestimates the creativity and self activity of the working class, the notion of the self-denying professional revolutionary, the need to modify it to take account of changing class composition and the growth of the autonomous movements (Ian McKenzie and Fred Read 'Rethinking Party and Class' DB Feb 1980, McKenzie 'Clarifying...').

What is the role of leadership? It is not just to co-ordinate but to initiate ideas, discussions, actions, it has to genuinely lead (Robert Koch and Ian McKenzie 'Introduction to Draft Constitution for BF' 1978 Pre-Conference document). Thus the NC should(a)centralise ideas and experience, (b)oversee and co-ordinate branches, commissions, paper, journal, (c) plan the growth of BF and the movement of resources (PT 'Why we need...'). The NC should be composed of those members who are the most experienced and politically educated. They have to be able to analyse the general process of the class struggle, have organising ability, experience of agitation, understand the totality of our politics, etc (PT 'Why we need...'). As for the question of women and the NC, women in BF, it was argued in 1976, have not taken analytic work and political education seriously enough. An elected NC would encourage political leadership within the NC and therefore be a progressive step in relation to women's power in BF (PT 'Why we need...'). Above all the supporters of increased centralisation have argued that the problem of organisation is political. No formal arrangement can ever stop a bureaucracy taking over. Indeed a formalised leadership can only make things more visible, open and controllable (PT 'Why we need...').

Numerous criticisms have been made of the arguments outlined above. The stress on efficiency reduces the criteria for success to purely managerial (and not political) ones (Richard Kuper 'Democratic Centralism' ISA Conference document reprinted in 1978 Pre-Conference discussion). While in the long run we may be in a position to challenge state power it is ridiculous to allow this to dictate our form of organisation now. The forms of organisation appropriate to raising and extending socialist consciousness and grass roots organisation are likely to be considerably different (Kuper 'Democratic Centralism', Hilary Wainwright in Beyond the Fragments). As for the need for a total perspective what guarantee is there that a political party will transcend the various limited perspectives it brings together rather than reflect and reproduce them (Sheila Rowbotham in Beyond the Fragments). The analysis of Leninism presented above while it talks of seeing Leninism in its historical context instead largely relates Leninism to a timeless, abstract notion of the way social-democratic parties are organised. Modifying it in line with the changes of the last half century is said to be needed, but little is actually done to link changes in the relationship of the state, capital and the working class to changes required in forms of organisation.

The emphasis on leadership and the abilities necessary for leadership can also be questioned. If present abilities are what matter then inevitably we won't ever get away from the same old faces. National structures must also be seen as places where people gain experience of leadership (Tom Mann 'Leadership and Leadership' 1978 Pre-Conference document). As for women and the NC the 1976 pinning of hope in an elected NC has been shown to be at best naive. So far the supporters of increased centralisation have not come up with any other suggestions of how the power of women in BF can be increased and at the 1980 conference seemed reluctant to organise any future discussion of the question. Finally while it is true that problems of organisation are primarily political, you can go too far in playing down the role of structures. Having certain structures can facilitate the handling of political problems. We should remember that structures are political (WLBF 'Wot Crisis').

#### Where do we go now?

I think that previous debates about internal organisation in BF haven't been very productive. Both sides have parodied the position of their opponents and greatly exaggerated what particular proposals would mean in practice. Too often discussion has remained at the level of an abstract political discussion about the merits or not of democratic centralism. We have to narrow the focus down on BF. What sort of structures are appropriate to an organisation of our size? What would be the effects of particular changes on our practice? At the last conference many people were reluctant about having a discussion of internal organisation. To show that one is necessary you only have to look at the relationship between the membership and the NC which has persisted in BF over the last few years. Most of the membership has regarded the NC at best as largely irrelevant to their work in BF or at worst with suspicion and hostility. Some members of the NC have felt increasingly frustrated with the lack of response by the membership to things they have initiated. We now find ourselves in a situation where anyone who is prepared to stand for the NC gets on regardless of their political or geographical position. The only way any of this is going to change is if the membership and NC members come to an agreed consensus about what the relationship between the two should be. Thus why I favour a discussion of internal organisation is not because I think someone will come up with some magical structural solution to all our problems, but because we need a political discussion to thresh out certain questions: how can we ensure that BF adopts a feminist perspective in all aspects of its politics, what are the tasks the organisation wants the NC to perform and how should we prevent it becoming remote from the membership. (In this article I've concentrated on one aspect of the proposed dayschool the role of the NC and not the other women in BF. This is not because I consider it less important. It's obviously more important, but I've got even less idea about how it should be discussed). A discussion of the role of the NC cannot be taken in isolation from the question of the future direction of BF. Whether we continue along the path of being a loose support group for militants, or whether it is possible to return to being an interventionist organisation with collective priorities and practices. Different alternatives imply different forms of organisation.

For the moment we fall somewhere between the two. What sort of organisation is appropriate for what we are trying to do? I don't think that a role of co-ordination between branches, commissions, etc and nothing more encompasses everything the NC necessarily finds it self doing. There is a whole gray area between co-ordination and taking initiatives into which its activities will inevitably fall. It will find itself covering areas where there is no relevant commission or branch. It will also sometimes be making suggestions to branches or commissions to do certain things. However I wouldn't see this as the NC leading the organisation in the traditional sense of the word.

Big Flame branches and commissions are free to decide not to act according to suggestions from the NC. Not only is it important that the NC is not in a position to impose initiatives on the membership and has to win consent for them, but also the original source for the initiatives should come from the membership. The NC should take on the role of developing them before taking them to the whole organisation. One unfortunate consequence of the recent problems with the administrative functioning of BF which meant that NC minutes came out very late and were sometimes incomprehensible (hopefully things have improved now) is that branches fed very little in the way of suggestions, motions into the NC. During my six months on the NC the overwhelming amount of our time has been taken up with administration and co-ordination. The one major attempt to initiate a discussion in BF has been organising a dayschool on the Labour party, when the dayschool on internal organisation was postponed. I believe that the initiating of discussions in the organisation is an area where the NC (along with the education organisers) has a role to play, but here again it's vital that in selecting topics the ones chosen are the ones in which interest is growing already in the branches and commissions.

In addition to (a) administration (including responsibility for the functioning of the paper, journal, etc), (b) co-ordination between branches and commissions, (c) responding to external demands in areas not covered by branches or commissions, (d) making suggestions to the organisation of areas of future discussion, forms of activity, etc., there is one other main task for the NC. That is demystifying itself and attempting to break down divisions between it and the rest of the organisation, with the ultimate hope of encouraging others to stand for it in the future. Socialism is about developing people's self activity and self confidence. Thus, as Barbara Ehrenreich argued in her interview in Revolutionary Socialism, leadership involves creating other leaders by delegating and passing on skills to others.

I've made no suggestions for alternative structures not because I don't think they will help. But I do think the important question is political agreement on what we want an NC for. Then it would be easier to judge whether or not it's performing the role adequately. I've tried to outline the areas I think it has to cover. Until we have more of an agreement than we have at the moment we'll get people feeling either that the NC is taking on far more than it ought to or that it is being held back from adopting its proper role.

What structural changes would help resolve the present problems? So far hardly any suggestions have been made apart from the suggestion of a return to a delegate NC. I'm not convinced that this would make much difference. At present branches discuss before the NC who is prepared to stand. One or two agree with varying degrees of reluctance and usually don't stand again at the next conference. If delegation meant a high turnover of different delegates between each NC, then I would be strongly opposed to it. The lack of consistent attendance would mean that discussion would be repeated at each NC as new people came along, rather than being consolidated and developed. If delegation meant that a branch appointed a representative for a longer period (six months? one year?) then this isn't all that different from what happens in practice. I do accept the need for rotation of leadership (something the supporters of increased centralisation seem reluctant to do if you remember the repeated attempts at conference to remove the part of the constitution which limits membership of the NC to three years), but believe that the old system of delegation worked. Any new proposal would have to ensure a substantial degree of continuity between meetings. I also don't think that delegation would make much difference to people's reluctance to go on the NC. This has to do with their confusion over what exactly its purpose is and (often unjustified) fears about the time it will consume. Because of this they prioritise other work. This will only change if discussion leads to a new confidence that the NC is serving a useful purpose. Finn MacCool (N.London) P.50