

## CHILDREN AND SOCIALISM

No section of our society is more under attack in the present crisis than our kids. They are the most vulnerable and powerless of groups and despite Thatcherism's adulatory attitude to the family they are being hammered. The Left, including BF, only seem to be interested in them when 'they' miraculously become 'youth'. The whole education system is being devastated, youth club and community education are being slashed and nursery provision in some areas is being eradicated. The reorganization of the supplementary benefit system means that discretionary grants for shoes, clothing, staying on at school and such like will cease. School meals and transport are becoming too expensive for many to use, the pathetic 'increase' in child allowance in effect constitutes a cut. The list is endless and if the kids rebel there's always the new short, sharp, shock centres or the expanding police force to keep them in check. A new style of philosophy on children is emerging which says kids of today have had it too easy, they're undisciplined and wild (of course the schools and parents are to blame) and the few 'clever' kids need segregating from the non-achievers who need knocking into shape before they join the dole queues. The State encourages us to resent children.

The debate on children and socialism will be an endless one and an emotive one. I think it should include not only the issue of 'children under the Tories' but also the detailed discussion and analysis of the position of children in our own organization and within our own relationships. This would include discussion of the nuclear family, marriage and the quality of personal relationships within B.F. Our experience is rich - we have those who have experienced communal living, collective childcare, creches, women who have brought up their kids alone or with other women, nuclear families where the sexual division of labour exist and where it doesn't. We have comrades with grown up children and those with new babies. We have those who have shared or are sharing the responsibility of bringing up children who are not their biological sons and daughters. Although, like most comrades, I have strong opinions about nuclear families, collective childcare and 'pathological' motherhood, I think we should start by sharing experience in as honest and open a way as possible. None of us have the ultimate solution.

### A personal account

In 1973, F. and I bought a house with two other people. We had lived as a couple for two years and the reasons for wanting a change of life style seemed simple at the time. Although we got on well we both agreed that life as a couple involved a degree of dependency and possessiveness and insularity that were potentially destructive rather than positive. Libertarian politics and self interest mingled to create our ideology. The sexual division of labour as expressed in marriage and the nuclear family formed the basis of women's oppression and to undermine these institutions in our theory and practice was part and parcel of our attempt to undermine the whole system of capitalist and patriarchal oppression. We did not know the two other people very well at this stage but we all 'got on' and entered into the venture with the same degree of good will.

Our collective housed was happy and relatively stable - sufficiently so to pool our income. The other woman and myself decided we would like to have babies. We discussed the idea in great detail and although we were agreed that each individual baby was ultimately the individual mother's responsibility we did have a strong conception of doing it together. We were to support each other during pregnancy and were to 'collectivize' the upbringing of the children. The men, who also wanted children, were to be as involved as us. A friend of ours up the road was also thinking of having a baby. The three of us women had been involved in the Women's Liberation Movement together and were determined to have the kids we wanted on our terms! As chance would have it we all three conceived within six weeks of each other and this became the basis of our creche.

We started the creche when Rose, the youngest, was six weeks old. We were committed to several ideas then as now -

it is important for children to be with their peers and to develop strong relationships with their peers from the earliest possible age.

it is good for children to have strong emotional relationships with adults other than their parents.

it is good for parents to have the emotional and practical support of other willing adults.

we wanted to destroy the sexual division of labour in our own lives

we all wanted time and space to do other things like waged work, politics,

and time and space for pursuing personal interests and relationships.

We were critical of the quality of care offered by state nurseries - they were over crowded, over regimented and were breeding grounds for the most sexist, competitive and racist values of our society. We were also critical of the rather haphazard and inconsistent nature of some of the collective childcare we had witnessed.

Our creche operated on a 9 -4.30, five day week basis, involving a rota system of the six consistent adults. We had a long term view of it as a way of bringing the children up to school age. At the beginning there were two close friends who were not at that time parents themselves who wanted to be involved. One's commitment was rather erratic because of work and they both dropped out eventually, partly because of personal crises and finally because they went abroad.

We were in very privileged positions. We were all either doing part time work or teaching jobs that entailed a day off a week for 'admin'. We were all available for the rota and we could all afford to live. They were all first children so noone had to accomodate to the different needs of different ages. We had spacious houses.

Despite changes in our individual situations ( couples split up, individuals in and out of different jobs and different households, one child at a nursery for four months) our creche has continued in its original conception. Although we were able to offer support to three other children and their parents on and off during the years, the commitment of the original six parents and three children remained central. For one period we had a paid worker for the mornings. Now the three children are at nursery school every morning and in the creche for the after noons. They will all be starting at the same school in September.

As the children have grown older they increasingly want to spend non-creche time nights, w/ends with each other. This is very easy as we all live very close. Some times I hardly see enough of Rose but it is a liberation for her and for me that she actually demands to spend time away. If she is pissed off with me she knows she can take her tea to her friends' get support from others and return when she feels ready.

As adults we have been able to discuss our problems as parents. We have a completely reciprocal and equal involvement and dependency on the creche and this fact has enabled us to surmount many differences. Even with a close and intimate grouping like this it has always been difficult to criticize, however constructively, an individual child's behaviour and individual adults' attitudes to upbringing. From my experience to criticize someone's child and to challenge that child's relationship with its parent is about the most difficult task imaginable. It seems to involve a challenge to one's whole existence -- one's relationships, values, personality and politics -- but we must find a way of overcoming such defensiveness. If we profess that the personal is political, that our most intimate relationships are distorted by Capitalism and if we have a vision of socialism that would better the quality of our personal relationships we must find a way of overcoming such defensiveness. In women I think the main source of defensiveness is guilt.

### GUILT

It is easy to see how convenient it is for Capitalism that all children need to be with their mothers up to the age of 5 (at least). It is much more difficult to free oneself emotionally from this sort of brainwashing. Bowlby and more recently Penelope Leach act like the State's thought police on the tormented minds of women, like myself, who have deviated from the god-given model of motherhood out of choice! All the children I have ever known, like all the adults, display some pretty suspect, not to say unpleasant, behaviour at some time or other. It is so easy in the case of one's own child to blame oneself -- it's because I go out to work, go to too many meetings, always in a rush.

Guilt doesn't just operate round children but around the whole of one's life. It is a great motivator for people. Doing what you think you ought to do when it strongly conflicts with what you want to do. It's a killer. It affects most people who are involved with politics, especially women who are conditioned to always put others before ourselves. I think many comrades with young children are particularly vulnerable to this confusion and it can make us not only emotionally defensive but also erratic in terms of political commitment.

At present there is much scope for resentment between women in B.F. Many of us now have kids and this means very different things to different women. We do not support each other in B.F. on anything other than an individual level. There are women who feel put down for not being involved enough and women who feel put down for 'neglecting' their kids, there are women who feel invisible. What we need to be clear about are the different ideas behind the different positions. Are the women who remain active being irresponsible to their kids? Are the kids suffering? Is this because the organization as a whole isn't sufficiently supportive or is it because little kids need to be with their mothers all the time? Have the women and men who have lessened their commitment done so out of genuine choice - because they want to be with their kids as much as possible, because life in a revolutionary organization is ludicrously hectic? Or do people drop out of things because BF's attitudes to kids and creches are bad and branches won't take on collective responsibility for baby sitting? Should kids be a part of the struggle or 'protected' from it? How much do we divide our political life from our personal life out of choice and how much is the division due to BF's collective inability to respond to the needs of our children and ourselves? Let's be honest, even if it's just honestly confused.

### PRACTICALITIES

It should be accepted that people 'withdraw' politically for certain periods if they so choose. This might be in order to work abroad, to study, to have a baby, to care for a sick relative or any other number of personal reasons. Comrades should be able to do this without being 'heavied' and should feel confident that they can keep in touch and come back into activity when they feel able. The problems only arise when people don't make their individual situation clear - when people are irresponsible in pressing others to take on work they are not in a position to do and when people take on things themselves that they can't fulfil.

We must be sure that comrades with children don't withdraw because the difficulty and effort involved in keeping going is too great. This doesn't mean providing a perfunct creche and demanding in an accusatory tone that people use it. When Rose was a very small baby I felt really fearful about leaving her. However irrational, I thought that she would be at risk with anyone other than me. My anxiety was real and great and in some way I didn't actually want to be separated from her. I was lucky that I got used to leaving her from an early age with people who I trusted totally. In the case of people who have not had that experience even the best creche can seem terryfying. They can seem pretty terryfying to the kids too...but more of that later.

The discussion of children and socialism must include the whole organization. We should aim to share our experiences and confusions; we should develop our theoretical understanding of the issues involved; and we should discuss practical, structural ways of dealing with some of the problems in our domestic arrangements and in the organization as a whole.

Some of the issues I'm particularly interested in discussing include -  
The family and marriage - the relationship between women's oppression and children's oppression.

Collective responsibility and parental rights  
Kids' rights and the role of discipline  
Sexuality - the age of consent, paedophilia etc

### BF and children - BREEDING THE REVOLUTION - If you can't recruit, reproduce!

Over the four years I have been in BF the childcare has definitely improved. I think this has been helped by summer schools and the way in which many comrades make efforts with individual children over and above the creche situation. Rose has developed friendships with comrades all over the country and positively enjoys seeing them. This makes being in BF much easier and politically less confusing. We must not 'do' our politics at the expense of our children otherwise they will turn round and put two fingers up to our sort of communism and start queuing for their engagement parties in the Young Conservative Club.

I want our kids to learn that -

- i) politics is a part of everyday life, that political involvement is something to take for granted. This means taking the kids on certain demonstrations and pickets where there is no likelihood of danger. It means talking to them and answering their questions in a way that they can make sense of. (This is really difficult and is worth a discussion in itself - even the simplest of issues can really obsess small kids. For example Rose worried about George Lindo consistently until he was released. I don't think she'll ever forget that the police 'make mistakes'.) It means developing political practice that includes kids.
- ii) Socialist politics are fun. I want them to learn that socialists are nice people who like banana milk, reading stories and playing poisonous spiders. I want them to feel valued and important, by amongst other things, providing exciting creches, where you make things, do things and visit places with interesting grown ups who are on their side.
- iii) Socialist politics give the kids a chance to define what they want to do in the way that they want. That their criticisms are encouraged and taken seriously.

#### Collective responsibility and parental rights

One issue we never discuss, and which came up briefly at the last conference, is the relationship between collective responsibility and parental rights and responsibility. If as parents we are demanding that the organization takes collective responsibility on occasions for our children, then we must accept that those involved make demands of us. Non parents have the right to criticize and pass opinions on all aspects of childcare. We shouldn't put non-parents in the position where they are pressurized into the impossible task of looking after distraught or difficult (sometimes abusive) children without some avenues for collective consciousness raising where all opinions are respected and voiced.

Opening up our relationships with our individual children to others in BF can be very difficult but it can also be extremely rewarding. In my experience it's the only way to maintain the ind of interest and commitment to the organization that I want. For our kids it can provide an invaluable experience of communism - an experience that can begin to encourage in them the seeds of a creative and positive opposition to the system that oppresses us all.

S.C. Leeds April 1980