

"IT'S MAGIC" WITH BIG ERIC

One of the best aspects of our Summer School was the opportunity to get to know people in a relaxed atmosphere and have an opportunity to go beyond the frenetic exchanges at one-day events. Mary Rogers gives a recently joined member's view of Big Flame's annual beano in beatific Beechwood House.

I've been involved in Big Flame for about nine months. Last year's rave reviews of the Summer School meant I was really looking forward to going, but I still didn't know that many people and started getting twinges of cold feet before going up to Leeds.

LEVELLING EFFECT

I needn't have bothered really. There was a framework of small workshop groups which we all slotted into which soon helped to get over that problem. The groups discussed the plenaries, talks and workshops, as well as organising our turns on the creche and the housework. The combination of the intellectual, personal and practical had a levelling effect, helping to break down some of the differences between us; organising the creche became as much a priority as theoretical issues. It was no good knowing Marx backwards if you couldn't change nappies.

Zim, age 11
I HATED the food. I liked the bar best — there should be food there. Outings were boring quite often. There should be different ones next year. I liked the sleeping arrangements.

There should be more things with adults and children. There should be more films at night...I was disappointed when the Mars machine ran out.

We should get more pocket money and bedtimes the same as adults.

The theme — Basic Marxism and what's wrong with it — was fairly loosely woven through the week. Plenary sessions in the mornings were followed by workshops in the afternoons and numerous meetings on other themes. We worked hard at the theory, shared our varied experiences and talked about the struggles ahead. Most of the time was spent dodging all over the place, on some sort of intellectual switchback. But when you got giddy you could always get off.

VICTORIAN SPLENDOUR

Beechwood is an easy place to switch off in. It isn't at all institutional. It's very beautiful, green, quiet and relaxed — cows in the fields, massive trees sweeping the lawns. (The original owner knew what he was doing.) The garden was usually dotted with small groups chatting, their informality providing a really good foil to what often became intense discussions.



BIG ERIC — MAGIC

My kids only came up for a couple of days, but still talk about it. The best bits for them were when they felt involved in the adults' fun — 'Big Eric's' magic, the singing and the music. The creche was the best I've seen, consistent with Big Flame's concern with kids as a central part of our socialist practice.

Esther, age 9
I liked the outings best. I hated the food. I wanted to do less things with adults and more with kids. It was nice to be separated during the day. I liked the sleeping arrangements, the bunks etc. But bedtimes should be later. There should be food in the bar, even if it stopped kids eating meals. Most didn't anyway — and you've got to eat something.

CONNECTIONS

The ratios and strength of the women I found really encouraging. My own experience of feminist

politics is limited and one of my major reasons for joining Big Flame

Julian, age 11
We should have horror films in the evenings.

Food? Cheese and onion pies and pizzas! I didn't like the food this year but I liked the flapjack.

I liked the bar, we should have a supply of things like coffees and chocolate and crisps, and a better supply of things like Mars bars.

I liked sleeping inside, I wouldn't like being in a tent — I liked going to the pictures best. We went to see The Empire Strikes Back. There should be more outings to cinemas and more pocket money. Fishing trips should be organised.

We should go to bed at 11.15-11.30 pm.

I had some difficulty with outings with little kids. We should have more swimming, more activities doing active things.

Interviews by Sarah (age 14)

was to both get involved in women's issues and to make the connections between feminism and socialism.

CLEARER PICTURE

Looking back on it, the Summer School gave me a much clearer picture of Big Flame. The fact that there are different positions taken in the organisation — no dogmatic line — can make it more difficult for people joining. But in the end it's more rewarding because you become more involved in the discussions. The week in Leeds, meeting new people, members and sympathisers added new perspectives on different issues which helped in understanding some of the current debates.

CONFIDENCE

Although in many ways very relaxed, the summer school was hard work. The opportunity of pulling together the personal and the political outside the usual compromising constraints and pressures meant a lot of re-thinking. And the supportive atmosphere at the Summer School gave me more confidence both in myself and in the organisation to begin doing that.

MADRID REPORT

The conference of the European Coordinating committee to discuss work in trade unions was in general a great success. The Movimiento Comunista which hosted the conference worked very hard to make all the foreign delegates feel welcome. The conference reminded me that no matter how weak the links are, we are part of a European socialist movement. It is important that we begin to build up these links so that, in the face of the increasing internationalisation of capital, we are better prepared to fight back. While we are in no immediate position to launch any joint European initiatives, these conferences are the first step.

ACHIEVEMENTS

The main achievement of the conference was the exchange of ideas and experiences con-

cerning our respective trade union work.

The conference was divided into two parts; one discussing the nature of the crisis and the trade union line and the other, building revolutionary currents in the trade unions. I thought that Big Flame had some important contributions to make to the discussion.

I will summarise what I think are the main points.

Fighting Reformism and the Nature of the Trade Unions

The SWP talked in terms of the reformist bureaucracy being the major obstacle to militant struggle. I argued instead that it is not just the bureaucracy that is the problem, but the nature of the trade unions themselves and reformist ideas at all levels. This seemed to be the general position of the other organisations as well.

Building a Rank and File Movement

This was a priority for all organisations. The SWP said that the purpose of the rank and file movement was to fight the bureaucracy. Following on from my earlier argument, I said that the major role of the rank and file movement should be to fight reformism on all levels, armed with socialist policies. It is not just a question of militant economic struggle. Political issues must be taken up by the rank and file.

Fighting Divisions in the Working Class

I felt this to be one of the major points to be made by Big Flame. Unemployment and oppression of women and blacks are central to our analysis and trade union work, not peripheral items to be tackled on at the end. The Movimiento Comunista also made this one of their main points.

Way of Organising

The SWP talked much of their front organisations. Trade union work is done by 'Our rank and file groups' and work around women by Women's Voice. I argued that we believed in working in independent organisations that were not attached to any political party and in the women's movement, in a non-sectarian manner. The other European organisations do not appear to have front organisations.

I made it clear that in Big Flame we did not see trade union work as the economic struggle and the political as outside or embodied in building the Party. We seek to make links between different areas of struggle e.g. the work place and the community, the women's movement or nuclear power.

Debate

By bringing out differences between Big Flame and the SWP, I do not mean to imply that we were involved in heated debates. On the contrary, our relations were very friendly. I only want to point out that Big Flame has distinctive politics and has a lot to offer in the way of ideas and experience. Many of the points raised were also raised by other organisations such as the MC and the OCT (Communist Workers Organisation). I found that in general we have more in common with some European organisations than we do with organisations in Britain.
Bonnie VandeSteege
Industrial Commission

CONFERENCE

Big Flame's Fifth Annual Conference is being held on 29 - 30th November. It will take place in Beechwood Hall in Leeds. Pre-conference discussions are already going on around the branches and will continue in regional aggregate meetings through October and November. They will take place in Yorkshire, the North-West, the Midlands and the South. The first will be on October 18th.

Sympathisers and readers of the paper are welcome to attend the conference, provided they attend the pre-conference discussions! If you are interested in coming to the regional meetings and the conference and would like to receive copies of the three pre-conference discussion bulletins, write to us at: 27, CLERKENWELL CLOSE, LONDON E.C.1.

LONDON MEETINGS

From this month, *Revolutionary Socialism* (R.S.), the journal of B.F., starts a series of monthly meetings in London to enable it's readers to collectively discuss articles that have appeared in the journal. The first two meetings are to discuss interviews that appeared in R.S.5: *Thursday 18th Sept., 7.30p.m.* Mike Cooley on Alternative Plans.

Monday 13th Oct., 7.30p.m. Raymond Williams on the Labour Party.

Both meetings will take place in the small hall of Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London W.C.1. (Admission will be with a copy of R.S. only - they will be on sale at both meetings.)