

FOR A NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LABOUR PARTY

Rob Banks	members of
A. Crowley	North London
Finn MacCool	Big Flame
L. Suddes	

1. Resituating the Debate.

We welcome the debate in BF which the McKenzie/Mark document has begun (at the same time it is necessary to acknowledge the efforts of others in BF such as John Kimberley to provoke a discussion of BF's future strategy). While we share McKenzie/Mark's concern with the problems of finding a revolutionary strategy for the current period, we believe that starting with the Labour party limits a complex debate to only one element of the situation. To adequately discuss the sort of relationship revolutionaries should have towards the LP we have to look much wider than what is happening within it and the number of people joining. In our remarks below we will argue the need to begin with an analysis of the balance of class forces in Britain today and, in particular, the nature of the current recession. But before that we want to make some comments on the narrower debate about the LP.

If a too exclusive focus on the LP is the wrong starting point for a debate on strategy then so is the crisis in BF (although this obviously will feature in the argument). Joining the LP or not has to be discussed in terms of the most viable strategy for revolutionaries today rather than whether or not it is a way of lifting BF out of its present impasse. Similarly tactical considerations about the different positions held by BF members shouldn't determine the outcome of the debate. Thus the worst possible resolution of the debate would be a compromise (e.g. agreeing to let those who want to join do so and let them get on with it) which is intended to limit members leaving immediately and allow BF to stumble on for a few more years. This would only reinforce the collapse of the organisation. It will only make any sense for BF members to join the LP if a substantial majority of the organisation believe that in doing so they will be making a valid contribution to class struggle and will support them in this work.

2. The Merits of the McKenzie/Mark Argument.

They are attempting to outline a strategy for BF which comes out of an analysis of what is happening in the class struggle in Britain today. They are trying to come to grips with the key role left reformism must play in creating the conditions for a move towards socialism in this country and the role of a radical reform programme in creating space, allowing the working class to develop its power and self confidence.

3. Reservations about the McKenzie/Mark Argument.

(a) We think they are too soft on left reformism and, especially, on the AES. They begin from the argument that the political choice today is between Monetarism and the AES (with the SDP as a possible third option) and anyone who doesn't acknowledge this is ignoring the reality of the situation we face. This is precisely the way left reformism wants to present the options. It makes alternatives either utopian dreaming or at best diversions from the main battle against the enemy Monetarism which should be put aside until this is resolved. We would argue that tactical support for left reformism should never be at the expense of unceasing criticism of its programme and tactics. Supporting elements of the AES can't be allowed to detract from taking up issues of violence against women, male power, racism, Ireland, etc.

(b) They greatly overestimate the commitment of working class militants to the AES and the extent of the impact of the AES on contemporary struggles. The AES has been developed by academics and LP research groups and the version of it which is held by many in the trade unions (both at the top of the hierarchy and the base) is not much more than left Keynesianism.

(c) The proposed move into the LP now isn't related to any long term strategy. Will it be the tactic from now onwards or may it be necessary to leave in a few years time? What do they anticipate will happen in the LP over the next few years (obviously they haven't got a crystal ball but they must have some thoughts about the possibilities on which they base their strategy)?

(d) They also have very little to say about what they think is happening in CLPs and what sort of practice we should develop inside. What we do can't be totally left until we get there and have discussions with others inside. If as it is rumoured the enthusiasm for joining has a lot to do with the great things going on in Toxteth CLP, then why aren't we being told about them to convince us just what the potential for work inside the LP is.

(e) We are not so convinced that there is such a great potential for the equivalent of Socialist Unity/the Project inside the LP anymore than there is outside. There are substantial differences between the Chartists, Clause 4, ILP, independents which keep them apart. A lot of the independents joined the LP precisely because they don't want to be part of any democratic centralist organisation and often only want to get on with local work.

(f) If the whole organisation joined the LP how would it function to prevent it simply merging into the LP. There is no mention of the forms of structure which would be retained.

(g) In concentrating on the LP they ignore all the other things which are going on. They say that the LP is not the only question but nothing in their approach allows you to draw links with the other things going on.

1. The Critics of McKenzie/Mark.

Our major concern about the criticisms made of the join the LP position in the last 20 was that there was little attempt to relate them to the state of class struggle in Britain today. Most of the points could (and indeed have) been made in a discussion of the LP could have been written ten years ago (or considerably longer). There is no attempt to pose any alternative strategy as to how we can move towards socialism other than via left reformism. There is no attempt to develop an alternative way of relating to left reformism other than by joining the LP. This is a very surprising omission if you remember that Marshall and Roberts were part of a grouping at the last conference which proposed a motion which made developing such a relationship a key priority for BF.

In most of the documents there is either a great deal of complacency about the problems facing BF or a great deal of voluntarism about how they can be overcome i.e. if we only work harder and give the organisation a public profile. We now want to go through some of the main arguments which have been advanced against joining the LP (either in the DB or at meetings we have attended) and give our response to them.

(1) Arguments we don't accept.

(a) First there is the approach which lists past statements by Foot, Hattersley, Benn, etc and asks how can you support a party like that. This argument is saying nothing new to revolutionaries in the LP or who want to join. All of them are well aware that nearly all the positions taken by the Parliamentary leadership are pretty awful. However this doesn't necessarily negate their position because (i) there are still opportunities presented by working in the LP at the constituency level (e.g. bringing you in contact with certain people with whom you want to argue your politics, gaining support for certain local campaigns and initiatives) and (ii) if people do keep joining there is the possibility of changing some of the national positions, although we wouldn't want to deny that this is likely to remain a lengthy and difficult process. Nevertheless the beginnings of a shift in policy towards the north of Ireland shows that things aren't inevitably static. The reasons for which you join the LP are very different from those for which you join an organisation like RCT, the Sparts or BF. In the latter case you can go through your checklist of what you think are the correct political positions. In the LP you recognise that you are going to have to fight for most of them.

(b) A second argument tells us to look what has happened in the past when the LP has come to power with a radical programme and especially at what happened with the 1974-79 Labour government. Two points can be made in response. (i) Again we can separate the local and national levels. In many CLPs the left survived the reverses of the Parliamentary left from 1974 onwards and was able to continue building up its strength until it is in control in several places (see for example many of the candidates put up for the GLC elections in London). (ii) It's true that we've never had the LP in

office implement a left reformist programme despite a number of attempts. On the other hand we've never had in Britain an insurrection to overthrow capitalism by a mass revolutionary party, but many people on the left are still trying for it. We don't accept the belief in inevitable outcomes which underlines this argument. We don't know for certain that we will get a left reformist government which doesn't jettison its programme, but we do think that there is a better chance than ever before.

(c) Another argument is that revolutionaries have to try to break the link between the working class and the LP. It is a choice between living with reformism or trying to defeat it. Again it is not a matter of knowing what is wrong with reformism. Denouncing it and repeating the distinction between reform and revolution isn't enough. Reformism can't be bypassed and one place for the very necessary struggle against reformism is in the LP. The critics of working in the LP are simply repeating abstractly the need to struggle in a certain way when clearly in BF's case it isn't having much effect.

(d) One more argument which is related to this one is to say that the LP will always seek to control and divert struggles which are anti-capitalist in character. Of course there will be tremendous resistance inside the LP, a mass of bureaucracy and procedure which could easily wear out some people and so on. But there are similar problems with trade union work, broad front campaigns, etc and we still work in them. We believe there are people who it is important to reach who can be reached through the LP (and we are certainly not saying that these are the only people who it is important to reach) and, thus, it is worth trying to do so despite the difficulties.

(e) Next there is the claim that there is no scope for a feminist politics in the LP. As the articles from the women in Hemel and the many feminists joining the LP demonstrate the critics are either unaware of what is happening in the LP or don't want to face up to it. Obviously feminists in the LP are faced with a long uphill struggle, but you can't deny that the struggle has already begun.

(ii) Arguments we find more convincing.

Other arguments have been made which carry more weight. We don't believe that they are strong enough to rule out joining the LP. However, they do mean we have to consider very carefully how we go about working in it.

(a) It is very important for people in the LP to have people working outside it. Shifts to the left in the LP are in part due to it picking up on initiatives which have taken place outside it and the pressure those outside are able to put on the LP.

(b) There is a very real danger of groups joining the LP with radical politics and over a period of time making adaptations to debates inside the LP. Marshall makes this point convincingly in his document.

(c) There are also dangers of people joining the LP finding all their time taken up with internal struggles and dropping out of local campaigns. Rob Banks demonstrated this in the case of Islington in his article.

5. Our Position: The Analysis

Drawing on the points we have made in our criticisms of others, we now want to develop our own position. We are starting from our analysis of what is happening in Britain today because, as we asserted in the introduction, this should be the starting point for any discussion of strategy. What follows is very condensed and we hope to be able to produce a more expanded version for the next DB (much of the argument draws on Andrew Friend and Andy Metcalfe's Slump City and anyone interested should consult it). We are in the middle of an international recession, for which no end is in sight. Within this depressed state of the capitalist world economy, the British economy is extremely weak - probably the weakest of all the major economies. The years of the Keynesian consensus produced in the end a steady economic decline because it was unable to challenge the working class where it was strongest. With Thatcherism the Tories have looked towards a new strategy. The Tory government has made the recession the key stone of all its policies. The recession has become the chief means by which it has sought to maintain class relations in Britain, with other measures such as anti-union legislation being kept in reserve. The Tories attempt to restructure the working class can be divided into a number of headings:

(a) The impact on shop floor practices. Not only have wage increases fallen behind

inflation but the "new mood of realism" has been used to change working practices on the shop floor. For many capitalists BL is the model they all want to emulate.

(b) Deepening the divisions inside the working class. Because of the existence of a racial and sexual division of labour, the recession has not worked impartially. Women and black people have been hit harder by unemployment. As are young people who have no experience of union membership or collective class action. There has occurred a breach between the more prosperous layers of the working class and the marginalised layers. Much of Tory policy is designed to exacerbate these divisions by concentrating public attention on scroungers, lawless elements, immigrants, etc.

(c) Ideology. Accompanying the persistent crisis has been the development of a crisis mentality wherein the survival of the individual or family unit becomes the fundamental aim. The left has largely been unable to communicate with people's real fears and desires to get back to a more secure way of life for themselves and their children.

In this situation the limits of militant economism have been revealed. It does not convince workers who are faced with redundancy to say- we have the muscle, all we have to do is fight harder, get more support, etc. The long and depressing list of those who have chosen to take the redundancy money and run, cannot be dismissed. What has occurred in workplace struggles has also happened in many campaigns, particularly those against the cuts. The net result of this has been for more and more militants to look for solutions to the problems for the working class being created by the recession at the level of the state e.g. the state taking our companies in difficulty and seeking closure of plants. Hence the increased support for the LP. It would be a mistake to view the state of class relations today as one of unqualified triumph for the capitalist class. Willingness to fight has been shown by the miners, Ford workers and by the reception given to the People's March. Nevertheless the overall situation is of a working class which is demoralised and divided.

6. Our Position: The Strategy.

We believe that the defeats and demoralisation will only change under new conditions. It is therefore important for working class struggle what the nature is of the next Labour government. Will it follow the Wilson/Callaghan model or will it go some way at least towards introducing more radical reforms? We believe that getting left reformists into power both locally and nationally could be very important in recreating a situation in which the working class will have the confidence to start winning again. We should be part of the process not only by contributing to independent struggles, but also by helping left reformism come to power while never ceasing to be critical of its inadequacies. BF has to have a much more active relationship with left reformism. Can this be done from outside the LP? Some of the critics of McKenzie/Mark drew analogies with the relationship between MIR and Popular Unity. This may be possible with an organisation the size of the SWP with 3,000 militants. With one the size of BF it is inevitable that the LP, with perhaps a few local exceptions, will ignore us. Thus we are in favour of having members inside the LP.

(1) Joining the LP.

While working in the LP is a perspective we share with McKenzie/Mark, there are crucial differences in the way we see work in the LP:

(a) Firstly there are differences in emphasis in the way we should work in the LP.
(i) McKenzie /Mark do say that they want to turn the LP outwards and involve it in local campaigns and struggles which are currently neglected by most LP members. We would go further. Our critique of left reformism and the AES is more fundamental than theirs and we see our presence in the LP as attempting to undermine a lot of what left reformism stands for, and this can't take second place to supporting it against the Labour right. The success of the Tory party in the last election demonstrated the unpopularity of many of the ideas associated with socialism. There is little evidence of any major groundswell of support for the AES. Therefore if a popular socialism is to be constructed it is very important that we take our ideas into the LP.
(ii) The ability of the working class to defeat the current capitalist offensive resides only partly with the left winning control of the LP and implementing a radical reform programme. Also very important are the marginalised groups we referred to above. In most cases they don't trust the Labour party or relate to it in any way.

Usually this is because the LP ignores them and their struggles. BF is already committed to supporting the autonomous organisation of groups such as women and black people. BF has also always emphasised an approach to divisions in the working class which looks for ways of unifying the different sectors. This is vital if the tide of defeats is to be stemmed. Therefore one of the main tasks for revolutionaries in the LP is fighting for support from the established sections of the labour movement for the struggles of women, black people, etc and pushing for initiatives which bring different sectors together. Things such as Unemployed Centres (as long as they are very different from the TUC's guidelines) are an example of one possible initiative.

(b) Secondly we would want to keep BF's identity as an organisation by not having everyone join the LP.

(i) This would be a recognition of the fact that the decision to join the LP is a tactical one. We must always keep open the option of leaving again. It may not prove possible to push the LP as far to the left as we hope. The possibility may emerge of forming a sizable organisation outside the LP with politics close to our own. This organisation may be able to pursue a strategy in relation to the LP similar to that the MIR adopted towards popular unity. In any of these cases keeping BF as an organisation not totally inside the LP would make it easier to withdraw.

(ii) In addition we have already acknowledged the pressures when working inside the LP to be controlled and diverted by the LP machine. To prevent LP entryists from being integrated it is important that they have an external organisation to draw on.

(iii) We are totally committed to the importance of struggles outside the LP in putting pressure on it. We will need a mass movement outside Parliament to prevent a left Labour government suffering a catastrophic defeat. The present media assault on the Labour left is only a taste of what will come from the state machine, the City, big business, etc. Therefore it is not only important that BF members who join the LP should continue to work outside it, there should also be a substantial number of people who don't join and support struggles in other areas.

(c) Finally we place more emphasis than McKenzie/Mark on differences between particular CLPs. There may be some areas where the CLP is so completely sown up by the right that it makes no sense at all to work in it or areas where independant campaigns are going so tremendously well that it would be a diversion to become involved in the CLP. There has to be some degree of local flexibility to modify the national BF decision.

(ii) Guidelines for Working in the LP.

We believe that people should only enter the LP with a set of clearly agreed guidelines and offer the following incomplete list as some suggestions (by the time of any decision to join they would have to be a lot more detailed and worked out):

- (a) the main reason for being in the LP is to turn it outwards and support initiatives which unify different sections of the working class.
- (b) we should work openly as BF members.
- (c) the priority for BF members should not be seeking positions like councillor, MP, etc.
- (d) Decisions on whether people should enter the CLP should be decided collectively by the local BF branch in the light of the local situation and not be left to the preference of individuals. At the same time Local branches should take very seriously any national decision that BF members should join the LP.
- (e) Because of such local choices it is difficult to give an estimate of how many people should join, but we would anticipate a figure of around 30%. This is only a very rough guideline. In some branches it could be more. In some none.

The major difference between our argument for working in the LP and that of McKenzie/Mark is that we are much more tentative about the possibilities and place more stress on the dangers. It isn't going to be all that easy surviving in a male dominated, hierarchical, bureaucratic organisation like the LP. We also recognise that our position leaves a lot of questions unanswered. This document is open to some of the criticisms we make of McKenzie/Mark in terms of the vagueness of the analysis of what is happening in the LP today and how we see the future. We intend to work on an expanded version and would help/comments from other people.

(iii) Other Aspects of BF's Strategy.

We have argued that joining the LP (or not) can only form one element of a future strategy for BF. We do not believe that work in the LP can be tagged on to the present list of priorities. What is desperately needed is greater co-ordination between the work BF members do in their different areas so they fall under one strategy and the work done in one area supports that done in others. If BF members joining the LP is to be effective the internal organisation of BF has to be improved. People working in a priority area have to get more support. There has to be more collective practice, and (while we should never forget that different members will only be able to give different amounts of time to BF) the average level of commitment expected from members has to be increased. We have to go back to our list of priority areas and make it shorter and more meaningful. Our analysis of the present situation in Britain would lead us to argue that work around unemployment has to be made a much greater priority. At the same time as isolating a small number of campaigns, it is important that we try to implement the motion passed at the last conference about building a socialist-feminist culture which will cut across particular campaigns.

7. Our Position: Break with BF's Past?

Does the position we have argued mean a total break with BF's past theory and practice? We believe it arises out of our understanding of what was good in BF's past combined with a critique of the limitations of that past (see Finn MacCool's article in DB no40). In this article we have sought to add a discussion of the contemporary situation, and draw out of our understanding some strategic conclusions. We see what we propose as a change of tactics but not a rejection of BF's politics for the following reasons:

- (a) we do recognise that there is a movement towards autonomy in the working class (although many have exaggerated it), but when militancy dies down reformism often regains its grip (or worse disillusionment takes over). We need a strategy which recognises the role of reformism and seeks to make use of it in developing working class autonomy. Working class power and self confidence remains our key objective.
- (b) we recognise the great importance of BF's ideas on mass work and hope to use a style of work which draws on the best points of this tradition in turning the LP outwards.
- (c) the suggestion of joining the LP is not necessarily contrary to BF's previous analysis of reformism. BF's analysis emphasised that reformism does not just consist of the institutions of the LP and trade unions, but a set of practices or ways of doing things found in many other institutions and in every day life. These include delegation, sectionalism, nationalism, etc. It is perfectly possible to argue, as we do, that it is possible (and probably vital) to struggle against these practices in the LP.
- (d) We think that McKenzie/Mark's argument for joining the LP necessarily means at the very least placing less emphasis on BF's position of emphasising divisions in the working class and support for autonomous movements. The way we view work in the LP these remain a crucial focus.

Produced for the Dayschool on the Labour Party 13.6.81

Apologies for the somewhat cryptic, noteform character of this document which has been written and typed in great haste to get it ready for the dayschool.