

Introduction

We have deliberately kept this paper as short as possible, both for our own sakes and for the sake of comrades reading it. This has some disadvantages, though, which we ought to mention at the start. Firstly, we often state things very quickly without giving much of the analysis to support them. Second, we often deal very quickly with both analytical and practical consequences of what we say: for example, internationalism affects all our work, but we only take certain examples (Ireland, Cold War). Thirdly, we have spent relatively little space on discussing the views of other comrades within BF. Some of these shortcomings will be corrected (we hope) in other documents from comrades in the ESG. In case it needs saying, not everyone in the ESG has seen the final version of this paper, and comrades shouldn't be asked to answer for every dot and comma of what is said.

The current situation and the Tory/employers' offensive

Capitalist society in Britain is currently in acute crisis as a result of three factors: the international recession which has developed since the early, and especially since the late, 1970s; a specifically British recession the signs of which were beginning to appear even under the last Labour government; the long-term structural weakness of the British capitalist economy by comparison with major capitalist rivals: it is one of the two weakest (Italy the other) in the Group of Seven leading Western economies (those two plus USA, Canada, Japan, France, W. Germany). Because of these causes, it is entirely wrong just to blame "the Tories" for the ills afflicting working people in Britain; for the same reasons, "solutions to Britain's problems" proposed by Labour and trade union leaders are either pipedreams or fraudulent (or both).

Nevertheless, during the last two-and-a-half years the Tories have decisively affected the dynamics of the class struggle*, and it is important to be clear what they have done and what effects it has had, not least because many working people do blame "it" all on the Tories...

Firstly, the Thatcher government has followed policies - notably cutting the level of state borrowing - which have increased the already-inevitable growth of unemployment, and has also encouraged the use by employers of the threat of unemployment to force through changes in work practices. Because of the background of economic crisis, unemployment would have grown a lot in this period under any capitalist government (eg, a Labour one), but by following a high interest rate, high exchange rate policy ** and by somewhat reducing state schemes to "provide jobs" the Tories have ensured levels of unemployment at the high end of the range of possibilities. There is some evidence that it may have gone even higher than they intended (it is certainly higher than was predicted in several of the economic forecasts by which Budget decisions were supposedly justified), and some sections of manufacturing capital have been displeased by difficulties they have faced as a result of government measures. But the general run of business interests (and of solid Tory supporters, as a recent opinion poll showed) have backed the Thatcher policy. Besides far-reaching social effects, exacerbating the consequences of other aspects of Tory policy, the growth in unemployment has had four notable economic effects: to push up state borrowing, to reduce wage militancy, to increase management's control of the labour process (both exemplified at British Leyland), and to eliminate from the economy significant resources of out-dated or "superfluous" equipment (as for example in the steel and artificial fibre industries).

Secondly, the Tories have been able to play on a wide range of discontents

* "Class struggle" is intended to be interpreted broadly, not in traditional labour movement terms.

** In each case partly because of factors beyond their control, such as high US interest rates and high prices for crude oil.

people feel with present-day society, so as to (i) sharply increase divisions among the oppressed within Britain, notably at the expense of women, the young and the old, and black people, and (ii) to reinforce and utilise traditional attitudes and institutions in areas such as the nuclear family, the nation, law-and-order. For example, warmongering and the chauvinist campaign for a refund from the EEC budget have helped reinforce feelings of national unity; the post-uprisings appeals by Whitelaw and the like for more parental control of/responsibility for young people illustrate the links between as well as the growing importance of reactionary attitudes to the family and to law-and-order.

Thirdly, the Tories have utilised people's discontents, in combination with deep-rooted weaknesses of the labour movement, to turn people specifically against the organisations of the working class: for example, because of the Labour Party's commitment to state regulation of social life, it has been easy (and partly justified) to attack Labour for a thousand and-one bureaucratic absurdities and inefficiencies over questions like housing, tax, benefits etc etc; similarly, the fact that the trade unions usually struggle over narrow and sectional interests, not as champions of all the oppressed, has made it easy to turn millions of people against them, as in the reaction to the 1978/79 Winter of Discontent and, more recently, over questions like blacking and the closed shop.

Fourthly, the Tories have continued the two-decade-long, bipartisan trend to strengthening the state. This has taken several forms: the North London comrades document the growth of repressive powers (though it should be added that in some cases, such as Coventry, local Labour councils are assisting in the repression too), but also important to mention are (i) the massive strengthening of financial control by central government, through Heseltine's measures restricting the income and the fund-raising powers of local government bodies, and (ii) the creation of a picture of state invincibility, as for example in resisting the hunger strikers, and in sitting out the civil service dispute even at a greater money cost than the claim itself. It is worth noting that both the law-and-order and the anti-rates policies of the Tories get significant support not only from the well-off but also from sections of the working class; it is also worth noting that with a handful of exceptions (miners, water-workers, recent deportation struggles by black people) the state has been invincible, and even those exceptions have barely if at all been built on or generalised.

Responses

The first thing to recognise about responses to Tory policies and the recession is that there are millions of people who support what the government is doing - not only at the heights of manufacturing industry and financial institutions, but also in small businesses, among the professional people, and within the working class. We say it's the first thing to recognise because all too often revolutionaries discuss advanced capitalist societies as if the working class confronted only a small band of big capitalists, lacking any real support in the rest of society yet miraculously able to rule. The very fact of a Tory government is a strong refutation of that sort of simplistic analysis. Furthermore, although many former Tory voters no longer support Thatcher's party, the development of the SDP and its alliance with the Liberals gives additional importance to the recognition that the forces outside and opposed to the labour movement will be a major influence on what happens in Britain during the next few years. In particular, it would be a serious mistake to count on a Labour government (either of left or of the right) getting in at the next general election; it might happen, but it's far from certain. For this reason (as well as for many others, such as Labour's policies) our policies and strategy ought not to rely on electing a Labour government, and we should resist other currents which do make such reliance; doubly so when (as in the case of the IMG comrades) revolutionaries call for a Labour government pledged to socialist policies.

The second thing to say about responses to Tory policies and to the economic crisis is that the Tories are being pretty successful on several fronts: in industry and on the dole queues, in anti-union legislation, in whipping up racism and putting

through more racist laws, in increasing divisions among the oppressed, and in strengthening the state. The active opposition has been limited: though many redundancy fights have been lost, there is a mass (though ineffectual) Labour Party campaign over unemployment, there are mass movements by blacks against racist attacks, deportations and legislation, there is a huge movement against nuclear weapons, the Corrie bill was defeated, and the urban uprisings reveal far-reaching opposition within inner-city communities both black and (to a lesser extent) white. But overall the level of resistance is low, and the number of successes far too small. Even the uprisings, spectacular as they were, were limited in their political impact, and the Tories may well (with the able assistance of the Labour Party) manage to use them as a pretext for further reinforcing repression and law-and-order politics * (just as they took analogous advantage of the winter of discontent).

The third thing that must be mentioned is the left movement in the Labour Party, the growth in its membership, and the split with the SDP. The left movement is not only a response to the Tories, but is the culmination of a long process going back to the late 1960s and the shambolic Wilson government of '64-70, and also involving some leftward movement in certain key unions (notably NUPE). Nevertheless, Tory policies have given added impetus to the left move, and have even forced the Labour Party into opposing legislation which it prepared itself while in government (as over the Nationality Bill and the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act). The reasons for the SDP split are complicated (and we don't pretend to understand them very well - it's an area in which BF could usefully do more analysis, given how crude much left comment has been), but broadly speaking the Labour Party is moving away from the avowedly non-class, modernising, highly technocratic politics it developed during the 1950s and 1960s (under the influence of theoreticians like the late Anthony Crosland), and is returning to an earlier Labour tradition, in which the rhetoric of class struggle and official socialism are combined with a patriotic and class collaborationist practice. Correspondingly, some of the more technocratic sections of the party have split off to form the SDP (though their relative success requires deeper analysis). But the very fact that Benn's policies in the deputy leadership contest got such widespread support - despite endorsement of NATO, import controls, the United Nations, despite wholly statist conceptions of social services, etc, despite chauvinism over the EEC and other questions, - is clear proof of how narrow are the political limits of the left move within the LP.

The trade union bureaucracy has been concerned over falling membership, anti-union legislation and the fact that Tory refusals to meet and discuss with them mean the loss of their traditional role as negotiators vital to "good industrial relations". The bureaucrats' chief response - of which there are both left and right versions - has been to seek more power within the Labour party, so that a future Labour government will restore the privileges and the role of union leaders. This has been exemplified both by the financial stranglehold the unions have put on the Labour Party and the political role their majority have played - endorsing the 40-30-30 formula for electing the leadership, but also throwing the bulk of the block vote behind the right wing on key questions, such as NEC membership, control of the Manifesto, the three-year rule preventing frequent discussion of constitutional issues, etc etc.

Further to the left, the combination of many defeats (under Labour as well as the Tories) plus the leftward evolution of the LP has produced two major responses within the organised far left. The (semi)entryist groups and the SWP are politically adapting both to left labourism and to the traditional preoccupation with "labour movement" issues: ie, neglecting internationalism, anti-racism, anti-sexism, community struggles; in SWP's case going on and on about the "muscle" of the factory workers; in most cases, saying things like, capitalism oppresses blacks/women/gays or whoever, rather than white people/men/straight people

* through further militarisation of the police (CS gas, etc), plus a major propaganda campaign.

participating in that oppression (as well as their own). The dogmatic left (RCG, RCP, Spartacists) are being much more hard line against left labourism, which will mean that they have the chance to grow as disillusion develops over the next few years, but they also tend to blame all oppressions on capitalism, probably because the heritage of dogmatic marxism reflects the dominance of white men within the labour movement during the 19th and early 20th centuries, even if the groups involved are marginalised today. Both trends are increasingly shrill about their own merits and about the need to build their own organisations, in a very sectarian fashion.

It is harder to say what is happening among the non-aligned left, but thousands of people have joined the Labour Party, including many feminists and in a few areas (such as Brent, in NW-London) many black people. Part of the reason for this is the faults of the revolutionary left during the last dozen years: manipulation, authoritarianism, heady over-optimism, political softness on the Labour Party and on Labourite politics. Despite some vigorous campaigns, such as over violence against women, the WLM has encountered growing problems, and seems to have become rather more introverted, among other reasons because the current attacks from the Right are more determined and harder to defeat; partly also because revolutionary and radical feminist ideas - many, though not all, of which we would oppose - have made a lot of running amongst large numbers of feminists. (The recent Wendy Clarke paper discussing these developments is very well worth reading.) The black movement has been growing and developing, in the face of growing attacks, but still has many difficulties to overcome. Overall, there are still important areas where fightback is taking place and can be built on, but they are fairly isolated; and the probability of large-scale struggles beating back the Tory attack across the board (in the way that the 1972 miners' strike and other industrial struggles forced a U-turn then) is fairly low ... though we should keep our eyes open for the opportunity, and seize it if it comes (as it might have at BL, and may yet at Fords).

Strategic and Theoretical problems

In the situation described, BF has to give attention to two groups of problems. One is strategic and theoretical, concerned with basic problems of how capitalist society is to be overthrown. The other concerns perspectives for building Big Flame and for BF helping build (or rebuild) the various current struggles we are involved/in touch with (from anti-imperialist work to housing struggles). Concerning the relationship between these two groups of problems, it is essential to recognise that a strategy for socialist revolution does not grow out of a perspective for fighting current struggles: the two are related, they affect each other and must be compatible with each other, but strategy involves much more than just current struggles within Britain. (To judge from the documents in DB 43 and 44, this concept of strategy involves important points of difference with the four North London comrades and with the "Facing the Challenge" comrades.)

Several points about strategy have been agreed before within BF, and need only to be listed: the need to build BF and support for its politics; the need to create the conditions for a mass revolutionary party, and to advocate the building of such a MRP; the need for autonomous movements of the specially oppressed; the need for socialist revolutionaries to fight on all issues, not just (narrowly defined) "labour movement" questions. Additional points that are probably not controversial are: the need to encourage a split within the British labour movement (much more far-reaching than the SDP split, and in particular involving the trade unions); the need to break the Labourist cycle, as outlined in BF's 1979 pamphlet "Labouring under the Tories?"; the probable need for a left reformist government as a stage in the development of working class political consciousness; the need for internationalism, for looking at struggles and goals in a world not just a British context.

There are three points concerning strategy and reformism which may be controversial:

A. As decided in 1978, BF should (with limited exceptions, notably when there is

a class struggle candidate standing against Labour) call for a Labour vote, but should motivate it on a class solidarity basis, not by reference to supposed political merits of Labour policies:

- B. BF need to reject the view that the main difference between reformists and revolutionaries is that we latter recognise the need to use force in overthrowing capitalist society. The key features of the difference are (or should be): a wish for more far-reaching change, recognition of the temporary and contradictory nature of reforms, helping educate people to understand the need for and the (long) route to revolutionary transformation of society, breaking down people's exclusion (by the state and by a thousand and one other ways) from control of society and of their own lives. The psychology and politics of focusing on military struggle are extremely dangerous, not least because they encourage a top-down concept of social change, and we want to build a bottom-up one.
- C. No adequate approach to reformism is possible without recognising that left (as well as right) reformist currents are something we should oppose. We might agree with some particular elements of left reformist policies, we often want and need to form alliances with left (and not-so-left) reformists over all manner of partial struggles and objectives, but we need to be absolutely clear that left reformism doesn't so much "not go far enough", it goes somewhere else from where we as revolutionaries want to go. We need to reject the view that we should support and/or endorse left reformism.

The topic where there is most need for further theoretical work is connected to the "Sex and Class" discussion which BF became involved in with the publication of "Walking a Tightrope". But sex and class is only one aspect of what should be a debate also centrally involving race and nation, and taking in as well the innumerable other divisions amongst the oppressed (and, for that matter, the oppressors). We don't pretend the Emerald Street group has The Answer to all the problems involved: some comrades have made some contributions to the discussion, and we hope that both we and others will do more in future. What we can do now, though, is make sure the question is kept at the heart of debates within BF: as we outlined in a previous document, we believe it is essential for revolutionaries to define their goal as the elimination of all oppressions, throughout the world, for although enormous gains can be made short of that goal, ultimately all oppressions must be abolished least the gains made get reversed.

Perspectives

As already noted, BF needs to fight for its concept of revolutionary strategy, which is unfortunately increasingly distinctive compared to other approaches on the left in Britain. Because of this, and especially because BF's ideas run against the current of present developments, it is vital to strengthen BF and to build support for BF's politics. If we don't do so, there is every danger of the struggle for workers power in Britain being even more severely set back. This need to strengthen BF and its politics has several practical consequences.

First, we need to have more rigorously applied norms for what BF members are expected to do, in terms of participation in branch and commission life, and a field of work, in terms of paying dues and selling papers, and in terms of recognition in principle that comrades should change their areas of work if the organisation says so.... But while the norms should involve hard work they should not be such that people would get burned out trying to live up to them, and comrades ought only to be asked to change their field of work occasionally and after proper discussion, not every few months in IMG fashion.

Secondly, we need to give more attention to political education within BF. Every non-sectarian group tends to push education to one side, for the sake of being active in current struggles, but it is becoming even clearer than ever that the fight for socialism is going to be a long haul: in such a struggle, comrades' clarity of understanding is going to be vital. So, even if at the

expense of cutting back a bit on participation in mass activities, we should pay more attention, nationally and locally, to internal education.

Thirdly, the newspaper and other publications should carry articles which express or begin to develop a BF line; they should argue against the politics of other organisations; they should describe the activities of BF (branches and nationally) itself. There should be more explicitly BF propaganda and agitational material, again nationally and locally, and it should be used for interventions with a prospect of influencing people and recruiting them. One aim for this would be to recruit people who will be leaving other organisations in the near future: the SWP if (when?) the "build the party/stop autonomy" wing wins their November conference, and the IMG as left-leaning comrades leave because of the orientation to left labourism. It is important to recruit such experienced comrades, both for the sake of their experience and because the revolutionary movement as a whole can't afford to send as if to the scrap heap comrades who have put a lot of effort into it, and have often got a pretty rough deal from it.

Fourthly, a lot of what is affecting the left in Britain is international in scope, and is affecting other revolutionary groups abroad, so it is really vital to build closer links with, develop better exchanges with, as many of them as we can. This should mean the NC and Int Cttee taking more responsibility, rather than relying on the efforts of a handful of individuals, and we should have good reporting (such as recently on the USA) to BF as a whole.

Fifthly, we need to recognise that BF has a vital job to do in changing people's minds. Accepting that we as revolutionaries have to learn from other people, nevertheless we also have a great deal to teach: to win people to an all-round revolutionary view of the world; to win people to our specific strategy for socialism, and to our views of how particular partial struggles should be conducted. Naturally we should seek to teach through dialogue with the people we are working with, naturally we should shun like the plague any attempts to impose our views. But the very fact that we are organised as a revolutionary group is because we have distinctive views about society and struggle, to which we want to win other people. In that sense, we should not be ashamed to recognise that we have more to teach than to learn.

Sixthly, one of the most important things we need to get across to other people is that the struggle for socialism, and even the fightback against recession and Tory attacks, are much more than the sum of individual struggles over particular questions. If, by way of analogy, you take a photo of every building in a city, you don't get a picture of the city, just lots of views of buildings. In a similar way, looking at lots of particular struggles - necessary as it is - doesn't give us an understanding of the fight as a whole, and can actually limit our understanding even of the parts. For example, the effects in Britain of high interest rates are partly caused by world (and especially US) money markets: you can't understand, or know what to do about, such different things as increases in mortgage rates, increased interest payments by local councils on loans, cuts in national and local government expenditure and services, short-time working in industry because customers are cutting back on stock levels, etc etc etc, without some brief but vital analysis of the world economy. Or, to take another example, it seems very likely that the need for a hard-line law-and-order stance in Britain (in the face of urban uprisings and consequent outrage amongst Tory supporters) was one key reason for Thatcher's intransigence over the hunger strike: what was happening there determined by events here.

But the most difficult aspect of BF's perspectives concerns our approach to building the current struggles we are involved with. BF's present priorities for involvement are about right (though they should be more strictly followed, and more closely related to priorities for building BF itself): they are work around Ireland plus some other international solidarity work; anti-racist work (which needs strengthening); work in the women's movement and anti-sexist work; workplace work, to which needs adding work over unemployment and among the unemployed; and anti-nuclear work (both over weapons and over nuclear power). Furthermore, virtually

all comrades in BF agree that, in each separate area of involvement, it is vital that our propaganda, agitation and slogans reflect a proletarian, internationalist, anti-sexist, anti-racist approach, unlike the narrow labour movement standpoint of most of the revolutionary left at the moment.

Much harder to solve, however, is the problem of working out approaches, perspectives and demands for resisting the recession and the Tory attacks. We don't claim to have a full solution to this problem, but we do think there are several points we can usefully make.

- (i) There are currents within the labour movement - around the Lucas combine and the four trades councils' inquiry - which are correctly criticising the AES from the left, and insisting (for example) on locally-decided proposals not just Plans and Strategies concocted at the "top" of the labour movement or the state. Although this current has weaknesses - over feminism and internationalism, to name two very important ones* - it will be well worth our while encouraging it and seeking to influence it.
- (ii) It is important to motivate struggle as such, and to try to change the ideological framework through which millions of working people assess the options open to them, not just to make ritual calls for more/better struggles and/or more extravagant demands. For example, we should have a better analysis of what has happened at BL than the simple chorus "betrayal" that is coming from most of the revolutionary left. (This is not to say that there wasn't a betrayal, but that the ability of the union leaderships to get away with it requires analysis too, and that revolutionaries have to struggle to change what that analysis indicates about the rank-and-file, not just to denounce the traitors at the top.)
- (iii) Many of the struggles which do take place will be over very limited demands - "Sack Oxford" in Liverpool, against redundancies, for maintaining (rather than improving) living standards, and so on. It is essential that we recognise that it is possible to struggle in a revolutionary way even around such limited demands, and that it is vital for us to pitch in and help build people's activities, despite the limited demands. At the same time, part of struggling over them in a revolutionary way is seeking to go beyond the limits: in a very careful and non-sectarian way, we should encourage people to recognise that many of their demands are not really adequate, even sometimes wrong. "Community policing" is a good example of this: we need to build the resistance to what the police are actually doing, but simultaneously we need to have a perspective of abolishing the police, rather than just transforming them: this will have lots of practical consequences, such as not getting trapped into campaigning for police accountability. In other areas not so directly connected with repression our exact approach will be rather different from the police example, but the general rule of seeking to transform demands will very frequently apply.
- (iv) We need to explain to people that they can't rely on a future Labour government to solve their problems: not only might there not be such a government, at least for a long time, but if there is then (whether it is "right-wing" or "leftwing") working people will have to fight against it to extract concessions, not put pressure on it to behave well. Indeed, in current disputes many union bureaucrats (and others) are using the prospect of a future Labour government doing lots of lovely things as an excuse for not fighting now. We need to combat this attitude, and especially to explain that any durable benefits that might come from a Labour government would be the result of mass struggle for them, not of reliance on electoral promises.

* See, for example, the negligible discussion even by people as good as Mike Cooley and Hilary Wainwright in their article on planning agreements in issue two of the Labour Party magazine "New Socialist".

(v) As a general rule, the goals and the methods of struggle that we will encourage people to adopt will have key prefigurative elements, ranging from the need to organise in non-hierarchical, non-manipulative ways to the desirability of choosing slogans and demands which - even if only partially - present within the current set-up a vision of an alternative society.

(vi) Within all this, the influence of and the gains made by BF are bound to be limited, both by the unfavourable climate and by the relatively small resources that we have as a group. It would be especially mistaken to believe - as the "Facing the Challenge" documents seem to suggest - that there are large numbers of people around who are close to BF. Either the FtC texts have a wrong political definition of BF's politics, or they are wildly over-optimistic, in whichever case leading to proposals for building BF by something resembling a new, rather grand Project, rather than by arguing hard for clear political positions.

These points are not, of course, and all-round solution to the problems of building struggles or of developing BF, and we hope that the whole organisation will be involved in working out a more adequate solution. But we would urge comrades to note that a major capitalist recession is inevitably a bad time in which to wage many kinds of struggle, and that building resistance is not a matter of devising ingenious sets of demands - important though demands are. While we have to build and to seek to extend every struggle that does occur, it may turn out that an upturn in struggle, at least in industry, will not take place until there is an economic upturn.

However much we may deplore it, the increasingly widespread belief that a victory is near-impossible materially contributes to the difficulty of generating and winning struggles, whether over limited demands or for transforming society. Indeed, the paradox of the present situation is this: as capitalist society is getting worse, as the case for getting rid of it completely gets stronger and stronger, so people are not becoming more revolutionary, but on the contrary are increasingly willing to settle for less, for smaller changes than they would have demanded a few short years ago. It is exactly that paradox, both in terms of revolutionary strategy and of perspectives for current struggles, that BF needs to set about combatting.

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